

*What The Arraignment Meant*

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**by**

**Philip Gardner**

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## *What The Arraignment Meant*

You can take it or leave it. I'm not saying I'm blameless. I'm not saying that none of the charges are true, that none of this is my fault. What I'm asking for is an open mind, that's all. I'm saying there is a starting point to every event, and where people place that starting point can make one hell of a difference. What I'm saying is that when I held my mother's face in my stubby little five-year-old hands and kissed her, her eyes got all watery and she said, "You weren't supposed to be born," like I was the most precious thing on earth. That's one point.

And later, when I was thirteen and taped her calls and threatened to play them back for my Dad, she said the same thing, only a lot louder. "You should'a never been born," she screamed. Then she huffed out of the room. That's another. After their divorce I told Mom I never should have been born. She added ice to her vodka and said, "It's not your fault." She understood. And that's all I'm asking. So where is the starting point, I mean where do you begin?

I for one would like to start by saying I don't like the prosecutor doing what he's doing when he refers to me by name. Gary Powers, that's my name. That's a fact. But he's trying to turn coincidence into something it's not, or maybe he's appealing to something deep and mean in people, trying to squeeze out every ounce of meanness in their brain. It's hard for people to do good, hard enough without somebody bringing the devil out in them. So what if my first name is Francis? Nobody, I mean nobody, ever, ever called me Francis, not once, never. I can't help it if a guy who was never supposed to be born was born on the day the Russians shot down the U2.

My mother said, "It is a sign. Here is a baby that was never supposed to be born. And on the same day a man is shot down who should never have been there. For every Ying there must be a Yang." Everybody thought the pilot was dead or was going to be shortly. "And both this man and my baby have the same last name. There is a meaning there."

My mother named me and my Dad, never one to read, signed the papers. He came to hate me. Francis. No son of mine, he'd say. From the day I was born until the day he blew himself to smithereens fooling with the gas grill in the backyard, he never forgave my mother for naming me Francis, and he didn't forgive me for wearing it either.

The point is the prosecutor keeps referring to me always as Francis Gary Powers, I mean every time. Now you tell me, what do people think? Traitor? A man who ought to kill himself but doesn't have the nerve? Or assassin? You bet. Lee Harvey Oswald. John Wilkes Booth. James Earl Ray, Mark David Chapman. Now do you think these guys went through their lives with three names? Hell no. Only after they killed somebody did they get the three. I don't like it. Prosecutors did it to them. What is the effect on the jury? If you can get them thinking in triplicate, if you get their juices moving in that direction, if you get their brain tuned in to channel C.O.P.S., that's a finger on the switch. I mean I keep getting the feeling that I'm a place on a mall map and no matter where I go

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the little light says You Are Here. Like things are happening, things outside my control. You hear your name spelled out like that and it gets to you, makes you feel that you are outside events, like you've become a label for something else, something bad.

I'll say it again. I'm not saying I'm blameless. I'm saying let the facts speak for themselves. I'm saying let's have a clear picture. I mean, say these words out loud, Little Debbie's Cakes. Say those words over and over. Go ahead. Say it three times. Voice of a child molester.

Think about it long enough and it can mean anything. There is more than one side. I just want to make that clear. You've got your Yang. I just want to have my say.

\* \* \*

First off, I never complained about the rent and I loved my wife. But when you pay your rent and you don't complain, and you love your wife, you expect certain things in return. Especially when you do little things like a coat of paint here and a replaced window there and you don't present a bill to your landlord. Hell, I fixed the furnace once. Would have cost Crupper fifty bucks, minimum. And I was never more than five days late on the rent. Never. You expect Crupper to hold up his end. That's what I'm saying. You have certain expectations. And you don't want him screwing your wife. No matter how low the rent is. No matter. You want to know, so I'll tell you.

\* \* \*

There was something dead under the house. It was the smell. Could have been a cat or a possum, a coon or a dog. Could have been something else. Whatever it was was definitely dead. And it was under the kitchen. The air conditioner had been out for two days. Went out in the middle of the night. Sheila and I, Sheila, that's my wife if you haven't figured it out already. Just for the record, Sheila and I were sleeping on the kitchen floor. We put the fan on the kids and then found the coolest place to put down our mattress. It's a thick cement floor with green and white Formica squares on top. The smell still came through.

I said to Sheila, "I won't call Crupper until the morning. No reason to wake him. Nothing he can do in the middle of the night." That's the kind of man I am. Just for the record.

Sheila said, "It wouldn't kill him to know, the heartless bastard." Her breath smelled of vodka and menthol. "I say wake up the asshole."

But I didn't. I'm not that kind of guy.

I didn't know then what I know now.

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I left messages on Crupper's machine the first day. I left more messages the second day. The Darlington County Bank sign said 101 degrees as I drove home from work. The woman on the car radio gave the heat index every ten minutes, 109 she said, describing the heat the way some people describe sex dreams. Mirage waves hovered around our small, brick, rental house when I pulled into the drive.

Sheila said first thing when I walked in, "We're eating out." The fan blew full blast, sending the dead rot ricocheting off the walls.

"It don't smell so bad," I lied. "I think it may be going away." She just looked at me. She'd been at home all day, in the house, in her bra and underwear, watching the cool anchorwoman warn that it was too hot to let the kids play outside. She'd plotted the rising heat index with a black marker on the kitchen wall, gripped the fly swatter all day to tame the kids.

We only have one car.

I drove us to one of those all-you-can-eat salad bars. They have to keep it cool there. When I was parking the car, I thought I'd try to liven things up a little, change the mood. "This is the fat farm," I said to Toby. Toby's my five-year-old. "This is where people come to get fat." While we were standing in line, Sheila kept smelling the children's clothes and pulling them close, away from the other customers standing in line. "We'll be here forever," she said. "What's time to a pig?" said little Toby.

Lying on the kitchen floor that night, Sheila said, "If I was a man, I'd be kicking some ass about now."

"What am I supposed to do? You call, you leave a message. The guy won't return your calls."

We laid there watching the ever-shifting pattern of fruit flies in the moonlight. Neither of us said anything for a while. The smell really came through at night.

"I'd say it's time to take action," she said. I didn't say anything. "Goodnight, Francis," she said.

The next day I went to Crupper's office. He wasn't really a real estate guy, you know. He just rented a couple of houses that belong to his wife. He's a heating and air conditioning guy. Doesn't even have a secretary. When I knocked on the door, I guess he could tell from the knock that I meant business. His office windows were covered with that black smoky plastic stuff that dope dealers put on their car windows. So I say to myself, this guy won't even answer the door. At that point I'm thinking, what's he so afraid of? So I turn the knob, and sure enough the joint is open.

A door closes at the back of the small building. I walk to his office where it's cool. The place is a pigpen. Papers everywhere, you name it. I hear a truck start up outside. I

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open the back door, and guess who is racing away? Now Sheila begins to make sense to me. He's a weasel, a coward. So I say, he's got to come back sooner or later. We'll talk rent and deposits, we'll talk rental agreements and legal action, we'll talk dead things and cool air. He's got to come back sooner or later, I say to myself.

I pick up the phone to call my boss, Rudy. I figure I'll tell him my car broke down and I'm near heat stroke, that I won't be back in today. What's Rudy gonna say, I say to myself.

But I don't.

I press the redial button on Crupper's phone. I don't know why, the result of some chemical connection in my brain maybe. It rings twice.

Sheila answers.

"Hello? *Sheila*? That you?"

"Don't tell me," she says, "you decided against going to Crupper's office, huh? What's your excuse? Don't tell me the car broke down again. Do you know that it's ten days before the rent is due again? We got no leverage for ten days. Any man who really loved his wife —"

"You are absolutely right," I said. "I'll take care of it. I'm not leaving this office until he comes back here. It'd take a SWAT team to get me out of here before he gets back. You've got my word on that. If it takes all day and all night—"

"It's not bad enough," she was screaming into the phone now, "that a landlord won't get a dead animal from under a woman's kitchen, it's not bad enough that he lies, and lies, and lies about ... everything —"

"Lies about what," I say. "What do you mean? Since when did you talk to Crupper?"

"It's been weeks," Sheila stammered.

My brain did a sudden 180.

"Just you see to it that we don't die of heat," she said. "Or of this smell." She was shouting again.

I wasn't afraid of what she might say next. Only I knew that at the end of it she would say goodbye, Francis. So I hung up. I pressed the redial button on his phone again. It didn't even ring before she picked up. All I heard was a big in-suck of air. Then I hung up again.

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I buried the thermostat needle. I waited. I waited all night. He never came back. Left the place open, the lights on, the condensation rolling down the inside of the black plate glass window like big, fat elephant tears.

I didn't even phone in work the next morning. I'd been up all night. Had time to read the scribble on the desk calendar, look through his desk, find an envelope full of Motel 6 receipts, peruse the stack of love letters under the D-battery vibrator paper weight in the bottom drawer, do a little two-plus-two arithmetic, press the redial button a few times.

The next morning around ten when I got home, the house was cool. Crupper's bill sat on the kitchen table.

The whole place smelled like perfume. Sheila was still in her housecoat. She didn't look like she'd slept much, but her face had that real pink flushed look like someone who exercises regularly. Which means she looked different. She didn't even ask me where I'd been all night. She said first thing, "The kids spent the night at the sitter's. I couldn't put them through another night of that heat. I was here all alone. I've got to do some laundry." I went to the thermostat and turned it down to forty, which is as low as it goes. I put my hand over the vent. Sheila walked past me with a roll of damp sheets off our bed. "Everything's fine now," she said. Meaning the air.

\* \* \*

The heat wave continued. A few days later, she said, "I don't believe it, but I think something *else* is dead under the house. I don't believe it."

"Believe it," I said. "You've got your air conditioning. You can put up with the smell."

\* \* \*

You should have seen the look on Crupper's face.

\* \* \*

You want to know why, so I'll tell you. I've had some time to think about it. I'm not trying to be philosophical. I'm not one of those guys who knocks on your door and hands out religious materials. I'm just a guy who loves his wife, who wants to come home to a cool house in the summer, who wants to be appreciated and understood, who wants to, you know, do the right thing. A guy who pays his rent on time. It just so happens there was something dead under the house. It just so happens I'm a guy with three names.

**End of Story**

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