"The Soft Grey Sheen of Lead": Getting Inside the Hard-Boiled Detective

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Most of my readers, I assume, are familiar with the scene in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* where the "dingus," as detective Sam Spade calls it, shows its true colors. Gathered in Spade's apartment, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Joel Cairo, and Spade himself watch breathlessly as Caspar Gutman begins to scrape off the falcon's black enamel in order to reveal the precious gold and jewels beneath:

> Gutman's knife-blade bit into the metal, turning back a thin curved shaving. The inside of the shaving, and the narrow plane its removal had left, had the soft grey sheen of lead. (570)

We should have been prepared for this outcome, even if none of the people watching Gutman—including Spade himself—were. Nothing and no one in *The Maltese Falcon* can be taken at face value. In writing his classic thriller, Hammett (who was a Socialist) created a Marxist parable of commodity fetishism that coincided exactly with the pinnacle of the Roaring Twenties' economic binge: the story of an object whose "fabulous" value was a literal fable, just a matter of words. Like the promises of bankers and the sums printed on stock certificates, the legends that had become attached to the Falcon—tales of crusaders plundering infidel treasuries to create a single object of inestimable value—were all that supported its present market value. The alchemy that was supposed to transmute the "soft grey sheen of lead" into glittering gold failed in this

case because its verbal spells were nothing more than hocus pocus. "Inside"—which is to say, *in* itself—the Falcon was worthless.

Spade's "dingus" not only epitomizes Marx's fetishized commodity, but also symbolizes Hammett's view of human beings in general and the world in which they live. This is a world of material objects whose surfaces collide or mesh, but never open up, objects interacting with apparent randomness, but ultimately conforming to the laws that govern the motions of planets as well as people. It is, in short, a world without interiority. Its surfaces are not illusory, except when we assume they are hiding some kernel of true value or worth, some feeling or motive "inside" or "beneath" them. It's the belief in an interior of any sort that is the ultimate illusion in Hammett's universe.

I want to use this scene from *The Maltese Falcon* as a starting point for reflecting on the way hard-boiled detective fiction's treatment of interiority, and particularly its handling of the emotions and motives of the detective figure, has changed over the decades, from the book's publication in 1930 to the emergence of the female private eye in the early 1980s, when the so-called "Second Wave" of American feminism began to make its impact on the genre. I'll be focusing, eventually, on what have become the two most important writers of feminist hard-boiled detective fiction in the modern era, the late Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky. By examining their settings, themes, and female detective heroines, I hope to show how each represents a different reading of the male hard-boiled detective and, in particular, his interior life.

Conventionally, the hard-boiled detective has no interior life—or at least, none worth talking about. His emotions are understood to be irrelevant, even a distraction from solving the case and capturing the culprit. This attitude surfaced long before Dashiell

Hammett began to write. It's a prominent feature of Sherlock Holmes's personality, for instance, for whom, Watson tells us in *The Sign of Four,* "emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning" (117). With Hammett, however, the tough impenetrability of the male detective's hard-boiled shell becomes an important theme.

For Hammett, what we call our "deepest" emotions can never be known, even by us, except as they are expressed in speech and behavior. But in *The Maltese Falcon*, behavior means nothing in itself and words can't be trusted. Behavior and speech are always subject to assessment and evaluation by others. There is nothing of value to be found "inside" a person, any more than there is beneath the shiny enamel surface of a certain "black bird." This is one meaning of "hard-boiled" that goes beyond the idea of just being tough. Hard-boiled eggs, just like raw ones, crack under pressure. The difference is that nothing oozes out. The interior is solid, not sloshing around, uncontrollably, like raw needs and desires. Peel back the hard-boiled surface and you get—not the fluid and transparent "inner" life—but more of the same opacity: layers of solid white and yellow, or "the soft grey sheen of lead." Take "the lid off life" and you get what Spade calls, in the Flitcraft story he tells in chapter 7, "the works": the body as a machine that is just a moving part in the great machine of the universe, going through motions and experiencing emotions it only thinks it understands.

This bleak view of the great cosmic machine and the human machines whirring around inside it dictates Spade's style of investigation, which he inherited from his fictional predecessor, Hammett's nameless Continental Op. The Op (short for "operative" or employee of the Continental Detective Agency) appeared in more than two dozen stories Hammett wrote for *Black Mask* in the 1920s and in the author's first two novels.

In contrast to the deliberate and "scientific" investigative methods of his European counterparts like Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot, who gather clues and sift through testimony to arrive at the truth, the Op likes to "stir things up": "So that's the way you scientific detectives work," observes a sarcastic Dinah Brand when, in *Red Harvest*, the Op admits he has no plan. "Plans are all right sometimes," he replies, "And sometimes just stirring things up is all right—-if you're tough enough to survive, and keep your eyes open so you'll see what you want when it comes to the top" (75). Spade certainly passes the "toughness" test, but his version of "stirring things up" draws more directly on the trope of mechanical mayhem: "My way of learning," he tells Brigid, "is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkey-wrench into the machinery" (465). When Brigid won't speak the truth about the Falcon, he tells her, "It's all right with me, if you're sure none of the flying pieces will hurt you—that is, when the monkey-wrench gets thrown.

Sam Spade himself is as unknowable and impenetrable as anyone in *The Maltese Falcon*. We are introduced to him on the first page through an elaborate visual description that traces the "v *motif*" in the detective's face—eyebrows, nose, mouth—making him look "rather pleasantly like a blonde satan" (391)—or, for that matter, like the Maltese Falcon itself (204; see also 205). This relentlessly exteriorized point of view is adopted throughout the book, not just in Hammett's descriptions of Spade, but in his approach to every other character as well. The book is utterly devoid of free indirect discourse, which would convey a character's train of thought as though inviting us to listen in on it, let alone the direct narration of thoughts or feelings or intentions we might expect from third-person narrative. Even when we think we are being told someone's state of mind, a second glance shows us that we are only inferring it from exterior, bodily

signs. When Spade passes out after Gutman slips him a Mickey (drugs his whiskey) at the end of chapter 13, his loss of consciousness is conveyed by his slurred speech, his tightened lips, the “frightened gleam” in his eyes, and the shaking of his head until, after a kick in the temple, he goes "to sleep" (504). We are never told directly what Spade is feeling or thinking. Or dreaming.

This exteriorized, camera-lens point of view (which helped make the book so easily adaptable for director John Huston’s cinematic purposes in the movie version) represents a break with the Continental Op stories that preceded it, which are narrated in the first person. Even so, the Op is not forthcoming about his interior life, and the fact that he lacks a name reinforces our sense that his reticence is a function of his professionalism, something that John Irwin, in his groundbreaking book, *Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them*, makes a point of emphasizing. Hammett, after all, had been a professional private investigator himself before turning to writing. Here’s a characteristic example of the Op sharing his deepest thoughts, from *Red Harvest*: “I sat around, burned Fatimas [a brand of cigarette], and thought about the Elihu Willsson operation until dinner time. I went down to the hotel dining room and had just decided in favor of pounded rump steak when I heard myself being paged” (58). Well, what were the Op’s thoughts about the Elihu Willsson case? Apparently, they were not as important as his choice of a main course. A detective’s got to eat.

The Op will occasionally express sympathy for a client, or skepticism, but rarely a strong emotion. Even then, it will conform exactly to his appearance: “[I] ran down the front stairs, feeling as violent as I must have looked,” he says, “battered and torn and bruised, with a red dagger in one hand, a gun in the other” (273). In *The Maltese Falcon*,

any hint of conformity between exterior and interior is repeatedly put in doubt. At the end of his first meeting with Gutman, Spade appears to lose control of his "violent temper" (486), shattering his whiskey glass and threatening to kill Gutman's teenaged gunman. It's not until the next chapter that we begin to suspect Spade was putting on an act, but we have to arrive at that conclusion by interpreting his appearance and behavior in the elevator afterwards. "His lips were dry and rough in a face otherwise pale and damp. When he took out his handkerchief to wipe his face he saw his hand trembling. He grinned at it and said, 'Whew!'" (488). When Spade grins at his trembling hand and exhales, it's as though he's saying to himself, "*That* was an award-winning performance!" One more "wild and unpredictable monkey wrench," it seems, has been thrown into the "machinery" of the conspirators' plot.

What matters to Spade, as to the Op, is solving the case and apprehending the culprit or culprits responsible—in short, doing his job. At least, that's what he tells Brigid at the end of the book, in chapter 20, as he tries to explain why he's turning her in despite her declarations of love for him:

> When a man's partner is killed you're supposed to do something about it. . . . Then it happens that we were in the detective business. Well, when one of your organization gets killed it's bad business to let the killer get away with it. It's bad. . . bad for every detective everywhere. Third, I'm a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and then let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go. It can be done . . . but it's not the natural thing. (581-2).

Hammett has cast Spade in the professional mold of the Op, but while the Op does the job he is paid to do by the Continental Detective Agency, Spade, as Irwin emphasizes, works for himself, and has to keep his eye on the bottom line. Combined with his opacity, this makes anything he says about his motives, whether in this scene or for the rest of the book, dubious—especially when he cuts legal corners and offers his services to Cairo or Gutman in exchange for a share of the loot. And he knows how dubious it looks. His apparent willingness to be bribed is one more monkey wrench heaved into the machinery. Or is it? When Spade concludes his long list of reasons for sending Brigid to jail, she looks deep into his eyes and asks, "Would you have done this to me if the falcon had been real and you had been paid your money?" He answers by not answering:

> What difference does that make now? Don't be too sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be. That kind of reputation might be good business—bringing in high-priced jobs and making it easier to deal with the enemy. (583)

Well, yes, it might. But whether it does or not, we can never know. "Don't be too sure" is not the same as saying, "No, I'm not crooked," but it's not saying "Yes, I am," either.

Is there no way into this hard-boiled detective's "heart of darkness"? There is, but we have to stop listening to him. Throughout Spade's tirade in the final chapter, Hammett repeatedly calls our attention to the detective's face, just as he did on the first page. From the moment Brigid makes a move toward Spade, touching her face to his, he becomes increasingly pale, even "yellow-white" (579), his face "damp with sweat" (579).

His eyes are “glittering” (579) and increasingly bloodshot until they are “streaked” with blood (581), while his smile becomes a “frightful grimace” (581) in which the muscles “stood out like wales” (580). The body speaks the truth—but what is it saying? In Spade’s grotesquely smiling mask Hammett has created an ostentatious display, not of emotions, but of their control. And what, specifically, is being controlled? Anger? Love? Sorrow? Spade’s eyes are “burn[ing] madly” (581) as he recounts what Brigid did to his partner and almost did to him, but “glittering” with what can only be tears. At the end of his list of reasons for turning Brigid in, Spade bends her backward and leans over her:

> If that doesn’t mean anything to you forget it and we’ll make it this: I won’t [let you get away with murder] because all of me wants to—wants to say to hell with the consequences and do it—and because—God damn you—you’ve counted on that with me the same as you counted on that with the others. (583)

“I won’t play the sap for you,” Spade tells Brigid. But after “she put[s] her mouth to his, slowly, her arms around him, and [comes] into his arms,” Spade doesn’t push her away. She remains there until “the door-bell [rings]” and the police walk in. How long is that? Your answer, I think, will depend on what you’ve read in Spade’s face.

Is the detective angry at Brigid? He acts like it. Is he in love with her? He looks like it. And he seems to be profoundly sad, too. It’s not that he is unfeeling—quite the opposite, as we’ve seen with our own imaginary eyes. But he has to struggle, and suffer, to keep his feelings—whatever they are—from interfering with his work. What’s most striking about this depiction of Spade’s dilemma is how Hammett goes out of his way to

display, insistently and prominently, the detective's difficulty in controlling his emotions without ever telling us what they are.

It's hard to conceive of a greater contrast to the mystery of Sam Spade's inner life than the emotional transparency of female detectives. Private eyes like Kinsey Millhone and V. I. Warshawski let us into their thoughts and feelings with unprecedented intimacy. This was a development prepared for them by two of the most important male writers of hard-boiled detective literature in the American tradition, Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald. They took Hammett's impenetrable private eye and let him tell his own story, providing limited access, through first-person narration, to his emotional interior in a form of intimacy that was, at the same time, strategically oblique and incomplete. The words of Philip Marlowe and Lew Archer, despite being spoken directly into our inner ear, hint at emotional vulnerabilities lying below and beyond the surface of self-revelation—in Archer's case, so far beyond and below that they appear as personality traits elicited from the characters he encounters. Grafton and Paretsky draw extensively on this first-person hard-boiled male tradition even as they bend it to the demands of second-wave feminism. Each spends her inheritance differently, however.

The contrast between the two is evident in their debut detective novels, Grafton's *A is for Alibi* and Paretsky's *Indemnity Only*. But let's start with the similarities. Both titles allude to famous hard-boiled or *noir* titles: *A is for Alibi*, along with Grafton's whole alphabet series (*Y is for Yesterday*, the last installment before the author died, came out in 2017) recall Hitchcock's "Dial 'M' for Murder" and Fritz Lang's *noir* classic, *M*. The title *Indemnity Only* recalls Cain's *Double Indemnity* and its well-known movie version, screenwritten by Raymond Chandler. Both of these feminist first novels

appeared in 1982, at the height of America's so-called "Second Wave" feminism. Both books' protagonists are "tough," self-employed private eyes, both are divorced, and both are women trying to make a living in a traditionally male profession and world. And there the similarities end.

Paretsky sets V. I. Warshawski's adventures in Chicago, a locale long associated in the American mind with civic corruption and organized crime, but not with the tradition of hard-boiled detective fiction, whose classical locale is California. That's where Kinsey Millhone lives and works, in a coastal town called Santa Teresa—the fictional equivalent of Santa Barbara—and the case she pursues in *A is for Alibi* takes her on what amounts to a Cook's tour of the sunny but spiritually bankrupt environs of Southern California *noir*: Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Palm Springs.

Warshawski's origins are working class: her mother was an Italian immigrant, her father a Polish American cop in the Chicago PD. V. I. was very attached to both, and cherishes their memories. She's grateful for the life lessons she inherited from them. Millhone's origins are a mystery: her parents died in a car crash when she was five and she was raised by an emotionally distant, decidedly contra-feminine maiden aunt, in total isolation from her other relatives. Washawski has come up in the world: she went to the University of Chicago law school and worked for a while as a lawyer, but turned to detective work when she became disgusted with the corruption of the legal system. Millhone is an unreconstructed proletarian. She grew up hating school and defying her teachers, and entered the police academy at nineteen, straight out of high school, but quit the force after tiring of the condescension and harassment from male colleagues. She refers at one point to her "college days," but little of this higher education shows in her

writing or conversation and, in subsequent books, she says she's never been to college or has only attended a few semesters of junior college. Warshawski lives in a "large cheap apartment" on Halstead and Belmont—an artsy neighborhood on Chicago's wealthier North Side—and drives a sports car. Millhone lives in a converted garage, a "cubbyhole" all of "fifteen feet square" rented from her elderly landlord, Henry Pitts. She drives a fourteen-year-old VW bug crammed with trash.

One of the major differences between Millhone and Warshawski, besides class, is their comfort level—not to mention their degree of familiarity—with the nuances of conventional female dress, makeup, and hair styling. Warshawski knows her way around current fashion and accessories, and can even use foundation makeup and face powder to hide bruises sustained in a mugging. Millhone, raised by her eccentric aunt, is clueless. She cuts her own hair with nail scissors, wears no makeup, and has only one dress in her wardrobe, for occasions when she has to blend in as a regular "gal" while working a case. Millhone is, essentially, an adult tomboy, although, like Warshawski, she evinces a healthy heterosexual libido that sometimes gets her into trouble when, again like Warshawski, it interferes with her work.

These superficial differences in personality, background, and conventional female self-awareness point to a larger distinction between these two pioneering female detectives: their differing capabilities for emotional attachment and, by extension, female solidarity. Warshawski is alone, but attachable, as long as her talents, abilities, and independence are respected: she's not the marrying type, but she's capable of intimate relationships with men and, despite her women friends' tendencies to be overprotective, she's particularly good at fostering a network of female acquaintances, sisterly and

motherly, who continue to stand by her as the series unfolds. In *Indemnity Only*, her closest friend is an older Jewish doctor and holocaust survivor who mothers her back to health after a savage beating. V. I. plays the role of foster mother herself by taking care of the teenage daughter of a banker whose criminal activities led to his murder, and by comforting the college-age daughter of a union boss who is going to jail for insurance fraud and a contract killing. In short, Warshawski is not afraid of her emotions and the personal entanglements to which they may lead, as long as they don't get in the way of doing her job, and Paretsky continually foregrounds her role in fostering women's solidarity in a world poisoned by male greed, violence, and misogyny.

Kinsey Millhone is not just alone, but a radical loner, psychologically scarred by the early loss of her parents and her guardian aunt's emotional self-distancing. She wouldn't have room for a cat, let alone a vulnerable young woman, in her converted garage. Her experience of what, at age five, felt like parental abandonment makes her wary of commitment and suspicious of attachments on an almost visceral level, even as she remains fiercely loyal to those who have won her trust—a very small subset of the human race—whom she tries keeping at arm's length, emotionally. Her closest and most enduring friendships are with parental (or rather, *grand*-parental, i.e., parental "once removed") figures: her aging but spry landlord Henry Pitts and Rosie, a Hungarian cook who runs a local restaurant at which Millhone eats regularly. Despite her capacity for empathy, she is not interested in, let alone fit for, a mothering role herself. Or a sisterly one, either.

This fundamental difference between Warshawski's and Millhone's capacities for openness and attachment, especially toward other women, is what tips the balance of

Kathleen Gregory Klein's comparative assessment of Grafton and Paretsky in Paretsky's favor. In her pioneering 1988 monograph, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, Klein took a dim view of the history of fictional women detectives in England and America since 1864, finding that, with few exceptions, these female police detectives and private eyes did little to help women break free of the cultural stereotypes that had, historically, kept them in their place—which is to say, subservient to men. Detective fiction is a male-dominated genre shaped by a masculinist ideology and adhering to a masculinist formula, says Klein, which makes it inherently poisonous to women and their best interests. This is especially true of American hard-boiled detective fiction, even "in female dress":

> The characteristics of the formula identified so closely with the male hero, including violence, sexual activity, and the arrogance which allows him to assume a judge-and-jury role, have not been historically associated with women. Modeling the female protagonist on a male prototype establishes the conditions for her failure as either an investigator or a woman—or both. (162).

Authors like Grafton and Paretsky, adds Klein, must be careful or they will succumb, unknowingly, to "their own set of necessary compromises. Either feminism or the formula is at risk" (202).

Klein may be right about feminism and the formula, but her cartoonish version of the male hard-boiled detective shows she does not have a very firm grasp on the tradition. Is Sam Spade "arrogant," or just doing his job? Does he assume a "judge-and-jury" role,

or does he turn Brigit over to the authorities for arraignment, trial, and sentencing? Yes, he is violent (but also subjected to violence and the threat of death), and sexually active (but, to judge from the clench scene preceding Brigid's arrest, apparently looking for love), and homophobic (no room for mitigation there).

But Spade is not the only PI listed in *noir*'s Yellow Pages. When his successor, Philip Marlowe, makes his debut nine years later, in *The Big Sleep*, the only person he shoots is a hired killer, in order to save an innocent life and his own, and he remains chaste throughout the book, despite having to fend off both the Sternwood sisters' attempts to seduce him. As for Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer, is there a more sympathetic, understanding, patient, and forgiving private eye in the history of the genre? Klein's caricature of male hard-boiled misogyny fits comic book figures like Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, who made his debut in the aptly named *I, the Jury*, but her off-the-rack generalizations aren't tailored to the psychological nuances of the great hard-boiled male sleuths.

It will surprise no one to learn that these male detectives are not designed to push the gender envelope very hard. But the first crop of feminist detectives represented by Grafton and Paresky didn't seem to be doing a very good job of it either, in Klein's opinion. Millhone has "feminist inclinations" and Warshawsky is a "self-defined feminist[ ] for [whom] this identification is both a conscious act and an apparently consistent feature of [her] behavior" (202), but both are repeatedly "forced to compromise between their ideological position and their official professional careers" (203). Of the two, Klein believes that Warshawsky does more to advance the feminist cause through her "special links with women," and particularly with "women speaking

with truth and caring" to each other. Unlike Millhone, Warshawsky is "neither a loner nor a cynic" (215), says Klein, and Paretsky makes sure to put her up against villains who, in a similar fashion, are not isolated or renegade examples of male oppression—serial killers or stalkers, for example—but men in powerful civic, legal, or corporate positions, "associated with corruptible institutions or systems which have traditionally excluded or oppressed women" (214). "What has worked for Paretsky," Klein says, "is the simultaneous rejection or minimization of typical features of the formula and explicit introduction of some essential elements of feminism" (215). The hard-boiled formula survives, in other words, but only in a severely attenuated form. What really matters is female solidarity and consciousness-raising in the face of systemic patriarchal oppression. As Natalie Kaufman and Carol Kay note in *"G" is for Grafton: The World of Kinsey Millhone*, Millhone fails this litmus test: she is "not a preacher or a social worker," and Grafton "does not highlight social issues" (248), preferring to let them emerge in concrete situations without special emphasis.

Klein's view of the feminist hard-boiled writer's duty to challenge the masculinism of her forefathers is not uncommon. But if, in creating female sleuths, we are going to reject the male detective's emotional detachment, moral alienation, and preemptory violence, and replace his sense of isolation—not just from females, I might add, but from other males—with connection and solidarity, aren't we taking away those features that make him an exemplary figure of the violent psychological and spiritual impact of modernity in general?

After all, it was in response to modernity and its unflagging pursuit of so-called "progress"—its depersonalizing efficiencies of scale and divisions of labor; its capitalist

faith in imaginary credit and value-in-exchange; its promotion of an accelerating rate of production that could be sustained only by stimulating consumption far beyond the level of need—that the private and public spheres of social life began to assume a strictly gendered binary form. This division of the genders into separate spheres was initiated, ironically, at the exact historical moment when the abstract idea of equality began to provoke women to question their confinement to the home. Agitation for the rights of women did not begin with 1980s American feminism. It arose at least as early as the 1790s, with the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and poets like William Blake, in response to the Enlightened democratic ideals of the French Revolution and the dehumanizing effects of the early Industrial Revolution.

The forms of modernity's gender binarism were stark and unyielding: women belonged in the kitchen and bedroom, men in the workplace and boardroom; women spent, men earned; women raised the children, men "brought home the bacon" to feed them. Accordingly, the sexes were assigned ever more rigid and ideologically motivated "natures": women's supposedly passive, superficial, imitative, and highly emotional "nature" made them good caregivers and nurturers and home decorators, but poor earners and citizens and artists, while men's "nature"—energetic, competitive, inventive, practical—fitted them for all the roles that women were, by "nature," unfit to assume.

The emotional restraint of the male hard-boiled detective is as much a product of modernity's impact on the public sphere it created for him as it is of some biologically or culturally determined *machismo*. Having banished emotional attachment from the male workplace, where it could only get you in trouble and interfere with the smooth, impersonal movement of money, goods, and administrative power, and having

sequestered it in a private sphere dominated by females, modernity left men stranded squarely in the cross-hairs of its public assault on the human subject. In resisting or challenging or overturning the inherited hard-boiled formula, therefore, writers like Paretsky and Grafton ran the risk of creating feminist detective protagonists who were self-aware and autonomous to the point of no longer reflecting the full scope of modernity's destructive power, or else, like their male predecessors, alienated from others and their own emotions to the point of not sufficiently reflecting female experience and solidarity. Generally speaking, Paretsky has erred in the former direction and Grafton in the latter. In Paretsky, the tragic dimension is missing; in Grafton, the revolutionary.

The emotional palettes these writers use in depicting the interior lives of their detective protagonists differ accordingly.

Vic Warshawsky's predominant emotion is anger: just three pages into *Indemnity Only*, she feels "[her] temper riding [her]" (4) when a new client disparages her office, and even before we get to the next page, "a pulse start[s] throbbing in [her] right temple" when he says, "Well, this isn't really a job for a girl to take on alone" (4). There's little that ticks Warshawsky off more readily than someone telling her detective work is not suitable for a woman, or treating her as though she can't take care of herself. Then again, there's little that *doesn't* tick her off. Immediately after being dismissed by a smug, self-righteous college professor, Warshawsky wishes she'd "smashed in" his face (44). When her apartment is ransacked by thugs, she is "consumed with anger," and copes with it by pulling out her Smith and Wesson and fantasizing "pumping them full of bullets" (96). On the facing page, she feels angry again when her client tries to take her off the case, and when still another character implies she's continuing her investigation only in order

to get a wealthy family to pay her to stop, her fingers "itched to bring out the Smith & Wesson and pistol-whip him" (115). Warshawsky's hair-trigger temper is apparently justified by the patriarchal abuse that provokes it, but it's an almost parodic reflection of the aggressive outbursts that Klein condemns in Paretsky's male predecessors.

Kinsey Millhone rarely gets angry to this degree: irritated or annoyed, yes, but not enraged. In part, this is because Grafton, unlike Paretsky, isn't interested in singling out push-button issues like overt sexual discrimination or male chauvinism for criticism. Not once in the entire course of *A is for Alibi* is Millhone's suitability for detective work questioned at all, let alone on the basis of her sex. In fact, she is her own most severe critic. She knows how to use a gun, like Warshawsky, but she is troubled by violence and even opens *A is for Alibi* with the surprising statement, "The day before yesterday I killed someone, and the fact weighs heavily on my mind" (1). She ends her introductory paragraph by telling us, "Killing someone feels odd to me, and I haven't quite sorted it through" (1). *A is for Alibi* was the first of what eventually added up to twenty-five cases in which Kinsey had to "sort through" her "odd" feelings—not just about violence, but about human relationships generally under the decimating, self-alienating impact of late-modern American culture.

The killing, it turns out, was justified, entirely in self-defense. Stalked along a deserted beach at night by Charlie Scorsoni, one of the murderers she has been seeking, Kinsey is forced to hide in a dumpster full of stinking garbage. Cowering in complete darkness, gun in hand, "tears rising," her fear "like a sharp pain," Kinsey awaits the inevitable moment when the murderer lifts the dumpster lid, holding a huge butcher knife in his hand. "I blew him away," she says (284). Period. The story proper breaks off here,

in an emotionally satisfying and cathartically earned explosion of violence. But in a postscript, Kinsey adds, "The shooting disturbs me still. It has moved me into the same camp with soldiers and maniacs. I never set out to kill anyone. But maybe that's what Gwen would say, and Charlie too," the two murderers Kinsey set out to find (285).

Killing another human being, even in self-defense, disturbs Kinsey Millhone. But it doesn't make Vic Warshawsky break a sweat. She, too, has killed while on the job, but Paretsky dispenses with the event in a brisk four sentences, as part of Vic's explanation of how she came to be familiar with guns. And besides, it was an accident (80). In this respect, Grafton shows a more comprehensive understanding than Paretsky of the emotional trauma of killing any human being, for any reason. She also shows more familiarity with the hard-boiled tradition and Chandler's Philip Marlowe in particular. However pure and righteous the detective's motivations going into a case, he will inevitably become "part of the nastiness" before he emerges, like Kinsey Millhone climbing out her dumpster, at the end of it. By the end of *The Big Sleep*, Chandler's first novel, Marlowe has conspired in the cover-up of Carmen Sternwood's pornography career and her murder of Rusty Regan just so he can let Carmen's father, the dying General Sternwood, continue to sleep "the big sleep" of total denial. "Me, I was part of the nastiness now" (764), Marlowe admits. And his unintended or coerced complicity with systemic violence—of mobs, of corporations, of civic and police corruption--continues pretty much throughout the rest of Chandler's *oeuvre*.

Paretsky recognizes this shadow-world of organized, higher-level violence pulling the strings of everyday crime, and finds ample scope to depict its damaging effects on women's everyday lives in her Chicago setting. In *Indemnity Only* it's the union bosses,

the bankers, the mobs, and the insurance companies—all run by men—that are the ultimate source of violence against innocent citizens, and their violence against mothers and daughters—mental as well as physical—is foregrounded. But Paretsky doesn't understand how contagious "nastiness" can be under the aegis of modernity. Warshawsky is never in danger of getting sucked into the machine she fights, the way Marlowe or, as we've seen, Sam Spade was. Beaten, threatened, tempted, she is never forced to compromise with systemic evil, because Paretsky has created a world of good gals and bad guys designed to display V. I.'s heroic autonomy and righteousness in defending it.

As a result, Warshawsky has little depth of character—or it might be more accurate to say that however deep Paretsky wants to make her character, little of it is hidden from her, or from us. It's not that her emotions lack ambivalence, although most of the time, like her anger, they are pretty monochromatic. She "likes" Paul Deveraux, for instance, the hapless insurance officer who, unwittingly, ends up jeopardizing her life, his own, and that of the teenager she would protect by not taking her work seriously. She can even get emotional about him. Their goodbye scene makes her "throat tight" and she "feel[s] . . . like crying" (208). But these affects seem perfunctory given Paul's obvious unsuitability as a long-term partner. More significantly, Warshawsky thoroughly understands the reasons for that unsuitability and has explained them to Paul, in detail, when describing the reasons her first marriage failed: "The reason my first marriage fell apart was because I'm too independent" (141). "It's hard for me to talk about it," she adds, and then goes on to talk about it for five more paragraphs (141-2). There's nothing about Warshawky that she herself doesn't know and won't share, in first-person discourse, with Paretsky's readers.

From the first to the last page of *A is for Alibi*, what's "odd" about Millhone's feelings after killing Charlie Scorsoni remains "odd," both to her and to us. In this respect, Grafton shows a surer grasp of Marlowe's emotional self-alienation as he walked down those "mean streets" of detective fiction pioneered by Spade. For what do we ever really get to know about Marlowe in the course of seven novels, despite the tantalizing promise of self-revelation implicit in Chandler's adoption of a first-person narrative voice? He likes to play chess, he smokes a pipe, he hates rich people and scheming women, and he drinks—a lot. And yet, there are depths to Marlowe that Chandler indicates by means of symptoms and symbols. Do we want to know what kind of women he is attracted to? Here's the last paragraph of *The Big Sleep*: "On the way downtown I stopped at a bar and had a couple of double Scotches. They didn't do me any good. All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again" (764).

Why should it take a "couple of double Scotches"—a prodigious amount of alcohol—to bring Mona Mars to mind, the only woman in the book whom Marlowe truly seems to admire, unless, in a sober, self-controlled state, he cannot bring himself to think of her? Resorting to alcohol in order to forget the "nastiness" he's become a part of, which includes Eddie Mars, Mona's gangland lover, Marlowe has also let down his ego-defenses. And why should it matter that he never saw her again, unless he desperately wants and needs to? But you'll never hear Marlowe admitting or "sharing" anything of the kind, even with himself.

It took Chandler several tries to find just the right balance between revealing and hiding the detective hero's emotional depths. A dick like John Dalmas, in "Red Wind," is a bit too unbuttoned: "I wasn't scared. I was paralyzed," he tells us when a professional

hit man points at gun at his throat (368). And it's not just Marlowe's alcoholism that gestures toward the hidden, unacknowledged pain of his bleak and compromised existence. It's his famous mastery of wise-cracks, often at his own expense, which Chandler perfected in stories like "Trouble is My Business." Here's an example from chapter 1 of *Farewell, My Lovely*, when the gigantic Moose Malloy—"a big man, but not more than six feet five inches tall and not wider than a beer truck" (3)—grabs Marlowe by the shoulder and starts dragging him, against his will, up the stairs of Florian's bar and into the dangerous case of the missing Velma Valento. "I wasn't wearing a gun," says Marlowe. "I doubted if it would do me any good. The big man would probably take it away from me and eat it" (6). Try to imagine Vic Warshawsky saying such a thing, or letting herself be manhandled in this way. But it's easy to imagine words like these this in the mouth of Kinsey Millhone, who's not embarrassed to make a fool of herself and can even admit that sick people make her cringe with "distaste" (104) and hypodermic needles in particular can set her off (*F is for Fugitive*, 31). "God, I'm a sissy when it comes to shots" (32), she says—a very "soft-boiled" reaction, even embarrassing and girlish, if considered from a militantly feminist point of view.

Millhone, in fact, has a penchant for figurative speech that Warshawsky almost entirely lacks, but for which Chandler's Marlowe is famous. Of her self-cut hairstyle, for instance, she tells us it "looks like a dog's rear end" (*F,* 14). Underneath the wise-cracking surface, however, lurks the nagging question: "Who *am* I?" The clues to her fear of getting too close to others, her "emotional claustrophobia" (*F*, 12) as she calls it, are linked to other salient characteristics of Millhone's personality: her attraction to tight, enclosed spaces in which she can feel "untouchable"—for instance, her "cubbyhole"

apartment, her tiny VW bug, and, by extension, the dumpster in which she hides from Charlie; her nausea at the sight or sound of illness, especially in women; her "hypnotic" fascination with women doing domestic chores (*A*, 95), in scenes where she feels almost compelled to play a helping, daughterly role, like "a well-behaved kid" (*A,* 101), and above all, her overwhelming, and as it turns out, dangerous attraction to a certain kind of male, like Charlie Scorsoni—self-confident, emotionally open, independent, powerfully built, and accepting of her profession—all these tendencies can be traced to the car accident that killed her parents and pinned her for hours in the back seat, clinging to her father's dead hand and listening to her mother's cries of pain until, after what seemed like forever, her mother died.

The car accident is hardly mentioned in *A is for Alibi*, but its impact on Millhone's personality is repeatedly hinted at and the full significance these hints is elaborated with exquisite and unobtrusive care over the course of the subsequent alphabet series, as Kinsey comes to discover, in the course of solving her cases, more "odd" reactions triggered by the clients, witnesses, victims, and victimizers she encounters. "I collected more information about other people's lives than I did about my own," she reflects in *A is for Alibi*, "as though, perhaps, in poring over the facts about other people, I could discover something about myself" (128). Along the way, she also discovers family ties her aunt never told her about and the reasons she was kept in ignorance of them, until she is compelled to decide whether to pursue, ignore, or actively reject them—in short, whether to belong to a family or not.

Grafton has borrowed this idea of self-discovery through the detective's study of others from Chandler's most important successor, Ross Macdonald—a debt that Grafton

hints at throughout the alphabet series. Kinsey Millhone's initials, for instance, are the same as those of Macdonald's real name, Kenneth Millar. She operates out of fictional Santa Teresa—the same locale as Macdonald's series private eye, Lew Archer. Grafton herself has identified her childhood experience of being raised by an emotionally distant, alcoholic father and a perpetually ill, hypochondriacal mother with Millar's: his father abandoned the family when Millar was just a toddler and his mother, unable to cope, sent him to live with uncaring relatives and never saw him again. If Chandler is the source of Kinsey Millhone's emotional secretiveness and wise-cracking style, Macdonald is the hard-boiled writer who revealed to Grafton the hidden connections between America's postwar dysfunctional families and the violent impact of modernity's materialism, consumerism, and gender-segregation on the relations between parents and children. Kinsey Millhone was not abandoned by her parents, but their deaths felt to her like abandonment, and the impact on her personality was the same. Given Grafton's gift for symbolic commentary, it may not require too much leaning on the text to see the car crash as representing the violent impact of modernity itself on the American family's traditional intergenerational ties.

Unlike Hammett's Spade or Chandler's Marlowe, Macdonald's Lew Archer does not pursue justice for its own sake, but like a good psychotherapist serves as a catalyst for understanding and forgiveness, and above all, for self-forgiveness, among the people he encounters while solving a case. This includes not only young adult or teen-aged children and their conscience-stricken parents and grandparents, but grifters, thugs, and their disreputable female companions as well. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this," the respectable Mrs. Marion Matheson says to Archer in *The Galton Case*, momentarily

interrupting the story of her sordid past relationship with the hoodlum Peter Culligan. "Why don't you stop me?" (53). Fran Lemberg, slatternly wife of con-man Roy Lemberg, feels a similar urge to unburden herself: "I don't know why I'm telling you all this," she tells Archer. "In my experience, the guys do most of the talking. I guess you have a talkable-attable face." "You're welcome to the use of it," Archer replies (94).

In his essay, "Writing the Galton Case," Macdonald noted how "the literary detective has provided writers since Poe with a disguise, a kind of welder's mask enabling us to handle dangerously hot material" (878). In "The Writer as Detective Hero," he says that for authors like Chandler, that mask embodied an ego ideal: Chandler *was* Marlowe, the private "I" telling the story. Archer, however, is not his creator, says Macdonald, but rather "a consciousness in which the meanings of other lives emerge" (874).

In Kinsey Millhone, Grafton has made Macdonald's neutral "welder's mask" into a reflection of herself and her personal anxieties over the affective disconnection that parents who are "dead"—whether physically or emotionally—can leave for their children to inherit like a massive, unpaid debt. Like Marlowe, Millhone *is* a version of her creator, in a way that the rather featureless Archer can never be. But as with Macdonald's novels, it's the other characters whose lives she investigates that reveal to Millhone—and by extension, we must assume, to Grafton herself—the most about her own mysteriously opaque existence. That interior life, initially as unknowable as Sam Spade's or Philip Marlowe's or Lew Archer's, continued to open up as readers followed Kinsey Millhone down the "mean streets" of the twentieth-first century, all the way to the penultimate letter of the alphabet. To quote once more from Spade's tale of Flitcraft, Grafton has "taken the lid off" modernity and "let [us] look at the works" (63).

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