

## Security

By Charles Rammelkamp

“No, that guy was harmless, but still, it exposed a vulnerability. Anybody could just walk right in here and –” Mark Person gestured vaguely, thinking of his nemesis George Clark, the wack-o poet whose work he had rejected and who had subsequently made threats. “People get upset about the college admissions process,” he went on to the campus security officer. “It can be a real source of anxiety for prospective students as well as their parents.” *People go nuts about poetry rejections, too.*

“Thank you, Mister Person,” Sean Grabowski said. An earnest young man with floppy hair in his eyes and a droopy mustache, Sean was the head of campus security at Hausner College. “We’ll try to have our guards patrol more regularly, keep an eye out.”

“No way we could have a permanent guard stationed here?”

“Did anything actually happen?”

“Well, no,” Person admitted, thinking of his colleague Pam Weeks and her new boyfriend, the awkward Jason Wertz, a man whose poetry he had accepted for *The Cantwell Review*. For several days six weeks before, Wertz had come into the admissions offices asking to see Person but without leaving his name. He’d evidently become smitten with Pam in the process. It made Person nervous thinking that anybody could walk right in and find him at his desk, a sitting target. At least Wertz wasn’t out to get Person. He wasn’t George Clark coming after him with an assault rifle. No, Wertz actually seemed to hold Person in awe for being a poetry editor, an arbiter of taste – his sidelight to being an assistant dean in the Hausner admissions office.

“Our resources are pretty limited,” Sean apologized. “Hausner’s always been pretty quiet. There’s the occasional vandalism, petty theft in the dorms, graffiti in the restrooms.” He shrugged, indicating the myriad minor offenses college students were guilty of, but his shrug plainly said there were no terrorists, no Taliban, no lone nutcase gunmen. After Virginia Tech, though, you didn’t say that outloud. “But I’d say you’re as safe as anyone is here.”

*As safe as anyone.* How safe was that? Person allowed a frightful image of a madman with a knife bursting into the office to enter his mind, as if probing a decaying tooth with his tongue to feel the pain.

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Mark Person lived about half an hour away from Hausner College in the town of Algonquian. It was a pleasant drive through undeveloped land to the bedroom community from which residents drove as far as Roanoke, Richmond, Washington and Norfolk to go to work, even up to Baltimore. Algonquian boasted several shopping malls and had a good public school system but otherwise there was nothing remarkable about the town, which had been developed precisely as a getaway community for people who wanted relative privacy. The town had no history or culture or political bent, other than its name, a Native American tribe that had existed more or less in the area. A quiet, peaceful, middleclass community.

So it was a shock when Person pulled into his driveway and read the message, dripping in still wet red paint across the outside of his house:

**YOU DIE JEW SHIT.**

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“No, officer, I have no idea who could have done that.” Person restrained himself from mentioning George Clark. Even to his paranoid mind it sounded too farfetched, nothing he could prove. Would somebody go to all that effort because his poetry had been rejected? He racked his brains trying to remember if there’d ever been even a hint of an anti-Semitic rant in Clark’s e-mails, but he couldn’t think of anything. He wouldn’t bring Clark up unless he had some sort of evidence to back up his hunch.

The two cops, fully half of the Algonquian force, a community not usually plagued by crime, looked at the 12-inch letters spraypainted above the picture window. They scribbled in their spiral notebooks, consulted their wristwatches, but they seemed unsure what to do next. This was clearly beyond anything they’d had to deal with before.

“You checked to make sure nothing else had been stolen or damaged?”

“Yes,” Person answered, feeling he was getting some sort of procedural run-around. He almost wondered if he should even have bothered filing the police report, except that he’d need it for the insurance claim.

“Do we need to bring the state in here, Rod? I mean, it looks like a hate crime.” The younger police officer seemed unsure, looking to his partner for direction.

“I’m not even Jewish,” Person remarked.

“Then why –” The one called Rod raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t know.” Person racked his brains, trying to understand why George Clark would write such a thing. Bankers, Hollywood moguls, publishers were often identified as Jewish. “My wife’s father was Jewish, but we don’t practice a religion. Besides, it’s a matrilineal thing. Not that that ever stopped a bigot. Except maybe the Jewish ones.”

“Does your wife have any enemies?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Where is your wife?”

As if on cue, Linda Person’s Toyota drove into the driveway just then. Linda was a nurse at Hausner College. It was where the two had met, after Mark’s first wife left him for the head of the English Department, which was also why Person had left teaching for administration. Linda spilled out her car now, eyes wide with shock, her hand over her mouth. She hurried over to her husband and the policemen, staring at the graffiti. Person put his arm around her.

“It was here when I got home. The paint was still wet. I called the police.”

“But why?” Linda looked at the painted words in disbelief. “Did anybody see who did it?” The Persons’ home was shielded from sight on both sides by tall trees, maples, pines, Bradford pears and a spreading willow.

“We’re going to talk to your neighbors,” Rod said, as if the idea had just occurred to him, turning to his partner Dave for confirmation..

“I just can’t believe –” Linda turned toward her husband. She’d always had a slightly dazed, confused look, which Person always found endearing; he’d always thought it came from being part of the medical profession, the daily horrible shocks one must experience, but now it was exaggerated beyond shock. He squeezed her shoulders until she winced and rested her head into the crook of his neck.

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“You think this nut Clark did it, really?”

They were alone now. The police had surveyed the scene, taken samples and statements, left instructions and contact numbers, and then had gone to speak with

the neighbors.

“I know it sounds paranoid. But this guy’s just the type who might overreact, do something extreme. You should have seen the e-mails he wrote. And the cartoon! It was like being burned in effigy.” Earlier in the year, after the rejection and a nasty exchange of e-mails, Clark had drawn a cartoon of Person standing on a sinking ship called *The Cantwell Review*, complete with mocking, malicious words in a balloon over his head. The work of a stalker, Person had concluded. “It’s not that far from a satirical cartoon to spraypainting a house,” Mark concluded.

“Because they both involve putting words down on some surface?”

Mark did not reply. Perhaps he *was* being irrational. Linda’s skeptical tone stung.

“What do you make of the Jew reference?” The puzzled look came over Linda’s face like a veil.

“I’ve been thinking. He must have done some background check on me, my marriage to Phyllis and then my marriage to you.” Person’s first wife had been named Phyllis Eisenstein. She’d later died from breast cancer; as the school nurse, Linda Katz had given her some medical attention.

“Do you really think he *cares* that much?”

“I know it sounds bizarre, but this guy Clark *is* bizarre. Trust me. He probably looked me up somewhere and discovered I’d been married to two different women with Jewish-sounding names, either concluding that I must be Jewish too, or trying to implicate my family, threaten me. I don’t know! How do you follow the logic of a nutcase?”

“Where would he even ‘look it up,’ though?” Linda wondered. “It’s not like you’re a household name and a simple Google search will give us your life history.”

“I don’t know, but all kinds of information is available online or simply by making a few telephone calls. It’s not that hard to do. There’s no such thing as privacy any more. The government, insurance companies – they’ve all got access to our personal data. Even grocery stores track our purchases.”

“But knowing that your second wife’s father was Jewish? Where on earth would you find that out?”

“If you’re a stalker and you’re really intent, nothing’s too obsessive or out of reach,” Mark declared, but he didn’t look that sure of himself.

“You really think this guy Clark’s *stalking* you? Didn’t you tell me he teaches at a community college in Vermont or someplace? Would he really come all this way to spraypaint our house because you rejected his poetry?”

“Well, then, what do *you* make of the Jew reference? How do *you* explain it?”

“I *can’t* explain it, that’s just it! No mezuzahs on the door, no menorahs in the window.”

“But there it is.”

“But there it is,” Linda echoed, though she still sounded dubious.

“I’m thinking we might need to buy a gun,” Person declared after a moment, though even to his ears it sounded just short of ridiculous; he suspected he might be acting a tad melodramatic.

“A *gun*! Mark, please! You don’t even know how to use one! That’s just crazy. A gun in the house would just create greater danger! It wouldn’t solve a thing. Maybe we could look into a security service.”

“That’s exactly why we’ve moved out here to Algonquian, so we wouldn’t have to *have* a security service.”

“Well, we’ve got an ugly message spraypainted on the house. We’ve got to do something. Apparently we aren’t so safe and protected as we thought. Apparently George Clark can find us anywhere; we can’t hide from him, huh?”

“I’m thinking I’ll get a Beretta,” Mark went on, intrepid in his muted histrionics. Aware of the almost mocking skepticism in his wife’s tone, he continued to make a futile case for the gun. “A revolver or a compact. Just to have around, if only for show. Something to wave in Clark’s face when he comes to our door. The way they do on TV. Show them a gun and the criminals think twice about breaking the law.”

“A Beretta! You only know about Berettas from spy novels. You don’t know the first thing about using a gun, Mark, and I don’t want you to start now.”

“Damn that George Clark,” Person muttered, chastised.

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When Rod and his partner Dave returned to the Persons’ house on Morris Road an

hour later they had good news. Mark and Linda had been in touch with their insurance company. An adjuster was coming by in the morning, but Mark had taken photographs of the damage, as instructed over the phone. It was late in the spring and the days were longer, but the sun had already gone down when the two policemen rang the doorbell.

“Mystery solved,” Rod smiled when the Persons came to the door. “We have a suspect in custody.”

By chance, the two officers had come across the vandal. At a stoplight near the Algonquian Square mall they’d seen the man in the pickup truck with the cans of paint and a spraygun in the truck bed. They thought he looked suspicious and followed him onto Morse Avenue, where he stopped outside a house, stopped his truck and just stared.

“Isn’t that Isaac Fishman’s place?” Dave had asked Rod. Fishman owned a construction company in Algonquian; he was the main builder, employing several dozen people.

Acting on a hunch, Dave and Rod had approached the truck. A look of panic had come over the driver’s face, a young man in his twenties.

“Sir, we need to look at your identification,” Dave had announced in his most official cop tone. “We have witnesses who say they saw a red Toyota pickup truck earlier over on Morris Road.”

“I didn’t do it! That wasn’t me!”

“What wasn’t you?”

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“It turns out this guy Bob Turnbull had been let go by Fishman, and he wanted to get even. He simply came to the wrong house. Not very bright. You’re at 6208 Morris Road. The Fishmans are at 6208 Morse Avenue. He got the names confused.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Person could see Linda looking over at him with an I-told-you-so look on her face, but he refused to acknowledge it. He did feel a small wave of relief come over him, but the sheer randomness of the vandalism reinforced his sense of uneasiness. What next? His tires slashed? And George Clark was still on the loose!

Promising to cooperate with the insurance company, the police officers turned to

leave, and Person could no longer ignore his wife. When he finally turned to her, Linda was smiling at him.

“What?” Person said.