

# Global short stories competition

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Winner August 09  
The Dress  
Joyce Slobogian

Green has never been her colour.

Allie turns and casts a critical look at the back of the dress. It's cut on the bias and moves around her legs in forest green swirls. Her legs, always her best feature, are still attractive and the dress is definitely doing something for them.

The deep shade of the velvet sets off her blond hair to advantage., Well, mostly blond; there were a few grey hairs sneaking up in between, but not many, for all that she has just turned fifty. And these last few years have been no cake walk, either.

All things considered, she likes her reflexion in the mirror. Maybe, just this once, green might be the way to go. She sneaks a quick look at the price tag. The number makes her gasp. She's never spent that much money on a dress in her life. No way will she do it now, what with all the drugstore bills waiting to be paid. And the nurse's fees add up to a fair amount, too.

She can't resist running her fingers over the fabric - it's softer than the fuzz on a baby's head. "I really want that dress - it's been ages since I bought myself something new," she reasons. Of course, she's hardly been out of the house for months. One doesn't need a velvet dress to shop for groceries or to take out the garbage.

Slobogian/The Dress2

The reason she's at the boutique trying on dresses is the upcoming wedding of her best friend's daughter. "You're coming to the wedding if I have to drag you there," Judy had said and told her about the new dresses in "Lady's Own". Just the joy of trying the pretty things on had been worth the visit. That pleasure has to be enough - she can't possibly spend over two hundred dollars on a dress she might only wear once or twice.

Allie resolutely takes the dress off. "Quit dreaming!" she tells herself sternly and rushes to put her practical tweed skirt and blouse on. As for the wedding, she's not even sure she can manage to go. And if

she's going, the blue silk suit will do fine. So what if it's five years old? It's still good and the cut is classic. No one looks at anybody but the bride at a wedding anyway.

She grabs her purse and turns to leave the change room. Something makes her turn back to take another look at the dress. "What's wrong with me?" she scolds herself. "I know I can't buy an expensive dress like that."

"And why not?" Her alter ego is fighting back. "You take good care of your husband - you have a right to think of yourself sometimes, too."

Allie hesitates. It's true - Heaven knows she spends all her time caring for Ron day in and day out - and plenty of nights, too. She deserves a treat - she needs to go out and enjoy the company of other people, she yearns to feel pretty and have fun once again. What's wrong with that? It's not as if she was abandoning her sick partner - she'd hire a nurse for that day. Who knows how much good she can do Ron, anyway? Sometimes she is sure that he doesn't know her anymore and she wonders if he is even aware of her presence. So often he looks right through her with that vacant gaze that she has learned to dread. But he cries when she leaves the house to do errands, leaving him with the nurse. Big tears roll down his cheeks and he seems to implore her to stay, even though he can't remember the words. It breaks her heart every time and she hurries through her tasks to get home as soon as she can. And then he seems so happy when she comes back that her soul nearly bursts with love for him, no matter that he is no longer the man she loved all these years. He looks the same but his spirit has left for some unknown place.

Suddenly she makes up her mind. She wants to go to the wedding and she does not want to wear her tired old blue suit. Quickly she picks up the dress and takes it to the counter to be wrapped. For once, the budget has to allow for a purely selfish purchase, she decides. And she is determined not to miss the wedding. This very afternoon she will ask Kathy, the nurse, to keep the date open for her. Thank God for Kathy - she could never make it without her.

The temperature has dropped several degrees when Allie steps out of the dress shop. She shivers as she hurries to her car. All the way home to the farm, the radio broadcasts storm warnings. Allie manages to make it to the house in less than her usual fifteen minutes, aware that Kathy needs to drive back to town before the weather gets worse.

She knows as soon as she opens the door that disaster has struck. There's broken glass and china scattered all over the hallway. She can hear Ron in the bedroom hollering obscenities. Quickly, she takes her

coat off and follows the noise.

Ron is standing with his back against the wall, clutching a knife and glaring at Kathy. The nurse leans on the dresser, her hand holding a towel against her head. Allie's heart jumps in fear at the sight of blood seeping through the fabric.

"Thank God you're home," Kathy says, "I'm out of here and I'm not coming back. The man is dangerous; he belongs in a hospital."

Allie cautiously approaches her husband, who immediately calms down when he sees her. He drops the knife on the floor and lets Allie lead him to the bed, where he lies down without a sign of protest.

"What on earth happened?" Allie is shaking as she picks up the knife and follows the nurse out of the room.

"Search me! He was wandering all over the house, mumbling and getting more and more agitated. Suddenly, he started throwing things around - caught me in the head with one of your crystal glasses. When I tried to calm him down, he grabbed that knife. I wanted to call for help, but he wouldn't let me near the phone."

"I'll get the First Aid box and fix that cut."

"Never mind - I'd just as soon leave before he starts up again." Kathy gathers her things and reaches for her coat.

"I'm so sorry," Allie says, "he's never been like that before."

"Well, Alzheimer's is progressive and one can never know what they'll do next. I feel for you, but I can't possibly work here again."

"But -- Kathy, please, I need your help."

"You do need help, much more than I am able to give you. Admit him to the hospital - don't wait any longer. He can only get worse." And she's out the door before Allie can think of anything else to say.

Ron is curled up on his side on the bed when his wife comes back with a light dinner on a tray. She helps him to a sitting position and feeds him the omelette, toast and tea in little spoonfuls. He swallows obediently and smiles at her. The violent scene she witnessed earlier is not even a memory to him.

"I went shopping today in a nice shop Judy recommended," Allie chats, "I bought the loveliest dress to wear to her daughter's wedding. Want to see it?" She unpacks the dress and holds it up to herself. Ron seems to like it - he keeps smiling.

"I'll just take the supper tray to the kitchen," she says, draping the dress over a chair. "Be back in a minute."

Ron is quiet now and she takes a little time to clean up the broken dishes - one of them a cherished heirloom, she notes with a twinge of regret - from the kitchen and hallway floor. She debates making herself an omelette, too, but decides to wait until after she'd got her husband ready for bed.

He's standing by the bed, smiling, when she returns to the bedroom. Her beautiful new dress is on the floor at his feet, soaked in urine.

"Oh no," Allie moans, "you didn't do that to me - you couldn't possibly have done that to me!"

Her husband looks puzzled. He has no idea what caused his wife's anguish.

Tears pour down her cheeks, as she applies herself to cleaning up the mess. She can't stop crying, while she helps Ron bathe and dress in his nightclothes. When he's at last settled in bed, she collapses on the living room couch, unable to think or move. Her heart beats a frantic tattoo in her chest.

I can't bear it! I can't bear it! I can't bear it... The phrase keeps running around and around in her head like a caged animal.

"It's only a dress," she berates herself, knowing all the time that much more than a dress has been ruined. Her hope for a little time on her own, just a little breather, is gone for good.

When fatigue becomes overwhelming, she drags herself to bed and falls asleep almost immediately.

Allie awakes to the slam of the front door. The clock reads ten minutes after midnight. She can barely keep her eyes open, but she strains to listen. The storm seems to be in full blast, whistling along the eaves and rattling the loose board on the north wall that Allie always forgets to fix. She props herself up on an elbow and peers through the window by her bed.

Snow whips along to the wild tune of the wind. It batters Ron's figure stumbling down the driveway, his pajamas flapping around his bare ankles.

As if in a dream, Allie watches her husband disappear from her sight. Then she slowly lets herself sink back onto her pillow, unable to keep her eyelids from closing. Sleep takes over her mind and body and, with a sigh, she surrenders and turns to the wall.

Joint Highly Commended  
The hyacinth door  
Sue Clark

Would she recognise the cottage? The glimpse on the television screen had been so brief, the camerawork so jerky. It was only a small village. If she drove up and down every lane, looking at every building, she must find it, surely?

Inside the car, it was warm and cosy. When she'd strapped the children into the backseat, the wind that had whipped her hair into her face had been bone-chilling. But the rattling heater had soon raised the temperature inside the VW to match the early spring sunshine. Both girls were asleep now, hanging like rag dolls from their car seats.

How long would they stay that way? She gave a smile. What did it matter if they woke up and babbled to their daddy later about mummy taking them for a drive in the country? She didn't know why she wanted to keep it secret; all she knew was, the moment one of the girls rubbed her eyes open, she'd have to become briskly maternal again and head back home.

Even though they hadn't mentioned the name on the TV, she'd recognised the place straight away. Who could mistake that wide village green with its picturesquely perfect trio of church, pub and cricket pavilion? She wasn't so sure about the cottage. She'd recorded the programme and played and replayed the sequence, but still she didn't have a clear picture in her head of what it looked like. Whitewashed and thatched, of course, but that description would fit most of the homes in this smart 'Britain in Bloom 2006 winner' village.

'Grass-topped dolls' houses' her husband called them. But then she'd caught him looking wistfully in an estate agent's window.

Ironically it had been he who'd first noticed the programme.

'You seen this?' he said, snapping the Sunday paper at her. 'Isn't that your bloke, the one you're always on about? Mervyn Bragg's done an interview.'

'Melvyn,' she corrected, her voice cool but her pulse racing. 'Let me see that.'

It was true. A whole hour devoted to her favourite author! Her husband said he'd watch with her, 'to see what all the fuss is about.'

In the past she'd tried to get him interested in reading the books. She'd wanted him to be swept up, as she was, by the adventures of the writer's cast of colourful characters, living bohemian lives of

beauty and fulfilment, wild and free.

'A load of yoghurt-eating hippies, sleeping around and talking tosh,' he'd described the one book he'd flicked through. When she'd tried to have a grown-up discussion about it, he'd slammed doors and hidden in the garden shed.

He said he preferred his music. At night they would sit propped up in bed, side by side but miles apart, he plugged into his R&B, she balancing a novel on her knees. She didn't see how music could give him what books did. Especially his books, her author, as she thought of him. Why did she love them so much, especially since, in her heart, she knew she didn't really understand them?

That didn't seem to matter. It was part of the attraction, this unknown-ness, this feeling that something was going on between the words and outside the pages. She only glimpsed it every now and then but it was there, definitely, like a flash of yellow eyes in the shadows. And, with every book, she saw it more. That's how she would like to write. Leaving things unsaid but still there somehow, hovering over the reader's shoulder. If ever she did.

The publication of each novel was a big event for her. She would rise early, dress carefully and wheel the children in their pushchair to the bookshop. Her stomach fizzing, she'd pace up and down outside, before working up the courage to go in. The thrill of holding the new book in her hands was almost sexual.

Then she would sit at the round table in the window of the coffee shop with it in front of her, still in its plastic bag. Treating herself to a small black Americano, pulling off pieces of chocolate muffin for the children to share, she'd glance coyly at it from time to time, delaying the moment as long as possible.

Suddenly, her self-control melting, she'd slip her hand into the bag and draw it out. She'd examine the cover, the design, the colours and the lettering. She'd read the text on the back, noting if the quotes were from The Times Literary Supplement or Richard and Judy.

'Elegantly and passionately conceived.' 'Great vitality and charm.' 'An extraordinarily moving achievement.' And for the last one, the big one, 'His most ambitious work yet.'

Only when she'd drunk the last of the coffee did she allow herself the pleasure of cracking open the crisp pages. And if no-one was looking, she'd press her nose into them, breathing in the desiccated, woody smell of the paper and the acidic notes of the ink, as if inhaling the story.

She had his latest one with her now, on the back seat of the Golf, the bookmark tantalising her with the prospect of unread pages. In the mirror, she could see its hyacinth blue cover, glowing in the early

sunshine, his name embossed in shiny, black letters.

By now she'd driven past the village shop three times and was growing disheartened. A red kite, its tail twisting and correcting its flight in the stiff breeze, soared overhead and she shifted her position to follow its aerobatics. This slight movement changed her perspective and revealed an opening in the hedgerow she hadn't noticed before, a narrow track with grass growing down the middle. She turned the car into it.

The night the programme had been broadcast, they'd watched it together, she and her husband, sitting on the sofa. Only he hadn't sat, not for long.

'Any beers?' he'd piped up, not two minutes in.

'In the fri...'

She froze mid-word and he'd followed her gaze.

'Hey, isn't that the high street?' He shot up out of his seat and started jabbing a finger at the screen.

'And that's the Co-op and that's the posh boys' school and ...'

But she wasn't listening. Why hadn't she known that her favourite novelist, the only novelist she read these days, was a local man? He lived in Islington now, he was telling Melvyn Bragg, but he'd been born and spent his childhood in her town, went to school there, wandered the same market square, bought his sweets from the same branch of Woolies. Was this the hidden connection, the unspoken something she'd sensed just outside the pages?

What was he saying now? He was confiding to Melvyn that he'd recently returned to his roots, buying a second home – 'a country bolt-hole' he called it – in a village just outside his old home town. She could hardly breathe. Right at this moment, he could be sitting on a sofa a few miles away, sipping camomile tea and watching himself on TV.

When the programme was over, she told her husband she had a migraine and would sleep in the spare room. She needed to think.

Her little girl's head bounced lower, almost touching her knees, and the baby was sucking noisily on thin air as the car bumped along the winding track. It wouldn't be long now before they woke up.

And it was all for nothing! There was nothing at the end of the track. She frowned through the

windscreen, searching for a widening where she could turn the car round. A gust of wind parted the branches of the trees ahead and she saw a flash of white. A whitewashed thatched cottage stood in an opening.

Though she'd fantasised about this trip for days, she realised now she hadn't worked out what she would do if she did find the cottage. Pulling onto the verge, she chewed on a fingernail, then turned to look at the children. Both heads were drooping, both were breathing deeply and evenly.

Clicking the car door gently shut, she bent low and sprinted for the dry-stone wall surrounding the front garden. She ducked down behind it, catching her breath and stifling a giggle. This was more like a stakeout than a literary quest.

Even this close, she wasn't sure she'd got the right cottage, not until she bobbed her head up over the wall and saw the front door. It shone hyacinth blue in a shaft of afternoon sun, its knocker shiny and black. Just like his latest cover.

A gravel drive, barred by a metal gate with a 'Private' sign on it, curved up to the front. There was no sign of life. She massaged her cramped legs. How long should she wait? She glanced back to where she'd left the car.

A door banged inside the cottage. The front door opened and there was a blast of loud rock music, then a man's voice.

'He is your bloody son, after all,' he yelled over his shoulder.

When he emerged, she saw it was him, her author; that massive bull-head, that hooked nose, that curious tufty white half-beard. It was the face that looked back at her from the page every night and almost as familiar as her own husband's.

But she wanted more than a glimpse; she needed more. Ignoring the drumming in her chest, she risked another quick look over the wall. He was shorter and fatter than she'd thought, the nose sharper and rosier. Unseasonably dressed in dirty canvas shoes trodden down at the backs and baggy, tan shorts, he shuffled down the drive, shorts flapping around his bow-legs, emphasising his rolling, fat-man's gait.

She shifted her weight onto her toes, ready to uncoil and make a dash. But he veered off the drive, taking a path that ran round to the side. Was that it, the end of the encounter? A stab of disappointment then guilt flashed across her mind. She should get back to the girls. But she didn't move.

There was a rumbling and a brown plastic wheelie bin appeared. Twigs and flattened cardboard boxes stuck out the top. The author puffed behind it. His progress was slow.

The gravel drive was soft and every few yards the wheels dug themselves into deep furrows, forcing him to back up and plough another route. As he shoved, heaved and manoeuvred, she could hear him gasping. She hunkered down even further, feeling the points of the cold stones pressing into her body.

Reaching the gate, he fumbled with the catch, lost his balance and knocked the bin onto its side. Blackened rose clippings, slimy weeds, curled leaves, a squashed Whiskas Pouches box and an Izal Medicated carton spilled onto the drive.

'Damn it to hell!' Hands on hips, he cursed the swirling debris.

'Mummeeee!' A high-pitched cry cut across the damp air and he swivelled his head in its direction, eyes narrowing.

A woman appeared at the open hyacinth door. She leant against the doorjamb, angular and wild-haired, her feet bare, balancing a long-stemmed glass at her hip, watching him.

'What are you faffing about with now, for God's sake?'

'Those flaming gyppos are back,' he called to her, pointing down the track. 'They've dumped a rusty old banger. See? That VW? I've a good mind to call the cops.'

The woman put up a hand to shade her eyes.

'I told you we should get proper security – cameras, electronic gates, the works. Keep the plebs at bay. You coming in?'

With one last look at the litter spinning in the wind, he shambled up the drive and slammed the door shut.

It took a bag of sweets and an ice-cream to quieten the girls. So it was inevitable they would both be spectacularly sick on the way home. It went all down their clothes and across the back seat. She didn't bother to wipe the hyacinth blue cover before dumping the book in a litter bin.

## Joint Highly Commended Lobster Cocktail Bernard Lord

As a kid growing up in New York, Harry was no soda jerk. He didn't fall in with Billy the Hoof Riley, Sweet Tooth Scotty or any of the Bronx Boys. Too honest to rip off the rich, too humble to fight over territory, Harry would rather pitch at The House of Ruth or have an ice with his pa in Crotona Park. "Stay proud, son," Harry's pop would say, "keep your nose out of the gutter. Look to the sky. Keep looking. One day you'll sure see over the horizon, make out what the world's gotten up to. Imagine that? The whole wide world." Harry was hooked by the words: magical words, as if they'd been plucked from a fairy tale or hauled out of a book that was a damn good read. The image got him through the troublesome teenage years and in fact led to his choice of employment. Harry went into the insurance business: Overlake Valley Insurance, to be precise, on Churchill and East 45th in Manhattan. "It's the minutiae that count: the appearance of a new jazzy outfit, a pair of the latest fashion shoes or change to a top quality after-shave; the hastily put on tie -take yours today (pointing at the entire panel): those dilated pupils that hint of fear. I can spot any phonus bolonus. These are what make or break the claim. And keep the accounts in good shape.

Harry got the job that very same day. Within a year he'd been headhunted by all the top firms but remained a man of loyalty. It ran through his bones. He represented Mr Overlake.

It must be said that Harry was meticulous. He watched. I mean, longer than a guy takes at a peep show. He'd sit around for days in convertibles, cabs or rail coaches; put on all manner of get-ups to obscure his identity. That way the claimants thought they were safe and Harry was safe to observe their mistakes. Except for that one Friday night when he was in the the wrong place for the right reasons. He was snatching a cold borscht in Good Time Charlie's joint on West 47th. Harry got talking to Mr Runyon, a newspaper chap, about how he'd been tailing a sleazy automobile dealer who must be on a scam over car thefts. As chance would have it, the diner was packed with wise guys toting the latest roscoes and arguing seriously over a few dimes. Harry and his friend got lucky: a salvo of slugs missed them both by a whisker whilst the other clients were tattooed handsomely from head to foot.

Harry's modus operandi worked something similar to this: once he'd worked out the full score, he'd nettle the claimant by showing up on a daily basis. Like the owner of the Mom and Pop store in Manibba Springs who

contacted the company a couple of years ago when the chap's ever-loving wife had gone missing for a year and a day. The police tumbled on nothing suspicious. They'd carried out a search, taken prints and sieved through the relatives but came across zilch. Let the insurance sort the case.

The man appeared to be an honest sort but Harry sensed hesitancy in the voice. It had the tone of a dark pool: too deep to plumb, too black to see any signs of life. He'd stroll into the store to keep the feller informed by feeding him titbits like "Almost settled. Won't be long now." He'd leave with a bag of doughnuts, a roll of bread or a tin of Lima beans. And each day Harry noticed the tubs of Sunflower Oil in the back corner of the shop were growing ever higher. The chap got life and Overlake saved a bundle. Lucky for Harry, who got a decidedly evil eye from the cheat: a stare as though the man could break the agent's neck.

This was now the type of person he came across. They were a bunch of clams, a flat audience. He needed them to come alive or at least put up a fight. These days he was beginning to feel more like a Schmuck, not someone working for a highly respected insurance bureau. It troubled his dignity. He might even lose sight of the horizon. He'd already started totting up his do-re-me and thought of laying out some G's for a swell place for retirement-but not too swell that Mr Hoover got curious. Or for that matter any those guys he'd put away. Today, Harry was holed up in a shack on the outskirts of Bar Harbor in Maine. He was out there to look at the case of Fritz Wetzel whose wife, to all intents, hung herself while Fritz was out of town visiting an aunt. As it happened, the relative was somewhat good looking and an ex-calendar girl at that. Fritz had chosen a less than welcome time to put in a claim. The weather was so arctic that stiffies were dotted about like figurines: stills on their way to the mailbox. Cruel when there was no mail that day.

For outsiders, the state of Maine midwinter was like Hell frozen over. Down Easters were hardened to brutal weather: severe frost and endless whipping snow. Short days, long nights. Too lonesome for Harry. Which is why he spent the evenings in the Happy Lobster at the far end of Bar Harbor. He stuck to shots of bourbon and dined only on blueberry pie: the seafood dishes should have stayed in the sea. What he would give for Irish turkey!

Harry sat in a booth knocking out the dossier on Fritz. From time to time he'd slip to the counter for a whiskey and a chat with the local clientele: about speed traps, moose or a mangle of the two. He hit the jackpot recounting the scraps between the Yankees and the Giants. In no time at all Harry was a household name. In less than a fortnight he'd pieced together the entire family history of half the state of Maine back three generations. All this from casual conversations following a wink, a wave or a smile. Harry could persuade a Pit

Bull to let go of it's last bone.

Take the fine points on Jim the barman who had long, blonde wavy hair and a smile round as a summer moon: it matched his circular way of conversation.

"Yip." "Nope." "Sure." "Danno."

Joseph Urban was hard pushed to be more eloquent. Jim caught the lingo off his alcoholic stepfather who kicked him out the first week of moving in, helping him on the way with a burst of shot from a rusty sawn-off.

Jim mistook the Lobster for a Refuge and fell into the arms of

Mazy Belle. Now, Mazy was built from the ground up but had a kind-looking pan and was well thought of in the district. Jim's body suitably impressed her-she wasn't one for lexis-and the Happy Lobster was pleased to employ him. Jim felt he'd finally come home. To show his thanks he kissed her plumb full on the smush. Mazy took it as good news indeed.

But Jim was missing tonight. Harry reckoned he was nicely tucked up in bed with Mazy, which was the best place to be seeing that this frost was by no means a bundle of fun, not even for Santa Claus.

The replacement had good vocabulary and a clean, crisp way of expressing himself, dressed neat and showed off a trim hair-cut ( which was out of keeping with the scruffs who usually filled the joint). Perhaps Mazy called the wrong number, being so bleary-eyed lately.

At 11 p.m. precisely, a lean-looking figure burst through the door. The bloke looked tough, shoving up fifty and seemed pleased with himself. He must've been hungry to pick out the Lobster. It wasn't the nearest diner to seek out in this icy blast. The chap ordered The Special -a huge seafood platter accompanied by a litre glass of Lobster Cocktail. The course was normally reserved for major events or one-off celebrations: death was the usual call at this time of the season.

Harry went to the bar for one last drink and promptly discovered the reason for the man's high spirits. The feller swiveled round and pulled out a Magnum 45. Harry had not come across such a tasty piece for many a long time. And it was pointed in his direction. Close up, the face was remarkably familiar: the guy from the store at Manibba Springs! He'd broken out of the can recently, uncovered Harry's whereabouts and made here quite urgently, leaving behind a trail of moose that for certain never saw snow again that winter. More than that, the man seemed intent on making it 6 to 5 against this insurance agent having any further outlook on life.

What was more surprising still was the standard firearm of the F.B.I. that was pointed close on 5 mm. to the

nape of this jail-breaker. The gun belonged to the neat, clean-cut barman who was looking strictly humourless. Harry was taken by the draw speed and delighted that he had such a helpful friend.

“F.B.I. Drop it.”

There was a stillness as hollow as a morgue on Sundays.

“Go have a double dip,” came the reply. At this, a dozen officers sprang out of the woodwork to stress the importance of the old equalizers.

“Freeze,” they bellowed like a Baptist choir.

The convict knew he was surrounded and outnumbered. But Harry saw the man's finger tighten on the trigger. For what seemed like a stretch, the room was infused with acrid fumes from lead pumping in all directions; bodies fell like skittles; there was an outcry of ripe expressions, “Asshole,” “Shpos” and a whole rhymeful of others. Harry was pummeled thick and fast. However, when the smoke had cleared it seemed he was the only one left standing.

Of course, whenever he's out in a bar, club or diner these days-situations he knew could turn delicate -Harry takes to wearing a bulletproof vest. But he had one helluva headache, for which the blood-stained laceration at the side of his head could well be the reason. His right ear had been ripped apart. Harry was losing his looks and it seriously injured his pride. That very instant he thought of retirement and the swell place he'd been saving up for. It was about time Life did him a favour.

Being Harry, he felt obliged to stick around to comfort Mazy. She was inconsolable at the mess, especially since Jim had scooted off -grip-sack in hand -at the sound of the first shot, thinking his past was catching up with him. Mazy was overcome by Harry's concerns and thanked him in her own impeccable way. Together they cleaned up the joint and decided to invite the locals to a ding-dong party that night. She promised to patch up his ear and his looks later if he stayed a while. Why not earn a few bucks at the bar? A thought. Yep Maine was warming up.