The Agony of Saint Menshik

A mystery short story by Mark Montgomery

Detective Menshik knew he had very little time. He also knew that this was almost certainly a fool’s errand he was on, and that there would be hell-to-pay-with-interest-and penalties if he happened to get caught at it. (Again). To top it off he was with Kelly, who was far from the ideal partner for conducting the sort of police work he had in mind. They stood at the gate of a white Victorian house with dark blue trim, set off by a stripe of cranberry red.

“Well, Kelly, shall we go in?”

Kelly pointed at a poodle passing behind them on the sidewalk.

“DOGGIE!” she said, “Mommy fix!”

He scooped her up with one arm, slowly so the blue flip-flops didn’t fall off her feet.

“That’s right, honey, Mommy fixes doggies.”

The ad in the yellow pages had boasted that this was the oldest, most well-known law office in Provincetown. The old lady was from a prominent family — “owned half of Provincetown,” Boulie had said — she might well have retained the city’s oldest law firm. Menshik figured it was worth a shot. Ok, maybe it was worth only half a shot, but he was here in Provincetown, it would take five minutes, exactly what was the harm in it anyway? And anyway, it was nothing like he had done in New York last summer.

A few hours before, when Kelly had wanted French fries, Menshik saw an exceptional opportunity to use the pay phone he had noticed behind the Snack Shack down the beach. Miranda was, under her big straw hat, clearly absorbed in her beach novel, her
soft brown feet barely reaching the end of the rented chaise lounge. “Have fun guys,” she had said.

It was just one quick, innocuous little phone call, Menshik had reasoned. Luckily, the phone was answered on the first ring.

“Detective Boulen.”

"Boolie, this is Menshik. I want to ask something about the suicide yesterday."

"Menshik? Where the hell are you calling from?"

"From a pay phone in Truro.”

“Why aren’t you using your cell phone?”

Menshik declined to explain that the cell phone was under guard in Miranda’s beach bag. “I just have a quick question,” he said. “About the woman who fell from the balcony, yesterday. Was that a cat you found next to her on the sidewalk?”

“Yeah. You should’ve seen what Johnson did, drew a little chalk outline around it.” Boulie laughed.

“Do we know for sure that was her cat?”

“Well whad’ya think, Menshik, some cat came along, saw an old lady dead on the sidewalk and had a heart attack? The fall cracked his head.” He laughed again. “Johnson thought it’d be funny to draw a chalk outline around it. You know that guy has kind of a sick sense of–”

“So she jumped with her cat?”

“Yep.”

“Did you find out why?”
“Well, she jumped because she was going blind, we have no idea what was bothering the cat. The note in the typewriter said she didn't want to live if she couldn't see.”

Softly, to himself, Menshik said, “Jumped with her cat.”

“What?” Boulie said, “I can't hear you.”

“Did the note mention the cat?”

“Yeah, it did, actually. She said she didn't want Clippy, or Zippy, or whatever the hell his name was, to be lonely after she was gone. Which kind of stinks because, personally, I think Zippy might've been able to get over the loss and get on with his nine lives.” Boulie laughed again. “He could’ve found a support group.” Boulie laughed louder and did his widely-acclaimed TV-announcer voice, “Tonight on Oprah: Cats Whose Little Old Ladies Went Splat.” Laughter so loud that Menshik had to hold the phone away from his ear. When the self-induced mirth finally subsided, he told Menshik, “Anyway, that's why we're sure it's a suicide. The cat and the old lady hit the ground at the same time. Some guy was walking into the building and they both landed right in front of him. Scared the bejesus out of him!” This made him giggle, which in turn made Menshik sigh.

“Drippin! Drippin!” said a tiny little voice. Menshik looked down and saw rivulets of green ice cream running down Kelly's arm, a few bits of chocolate chip sliding along in the flow. The Snack Shack had been out of French fries. And as usual Menshik had forgotten to pick up napkins. He felt in his pockets for a Kleenex or something. He saw a torn paper bag on the ground by the phone, which he might have used had there not been some nasty-looking stains on it. “Drippin, Daddy!” Finally Menshik dropped to
his knees and began licking her little arm, starting at the elbow and working up. He held
the phone to his ear with his free hand.

“Are you still there, Menshik?”

“Yeah.” Lick, lick. “Just one more thing.” Lick, lick. “You said she was rich.” Lick, lick. “Owned half of Provincetown, you said.” He turned Kelly's arm to the left and took a
couple of licks up near her wrist. When his tongue approached the cone itself she pulled
her arm away sharply.

“NO, MINE!”

“Listen, Boulie, I happen to be going to Provincetown today.” Menshik hadn’t
actually officially arranged that yet, but he was pretty sure he could pull it off. “Is there
anything you think I should check on?”

“For godsake, Menshik, you’re on vacation. This is compulsive even for you.
That’s why you’re not on the cell phone, huh, because Miranda doesn’t know you’re
calling me?” Menshik didn’t answer. “The old lady killed herself, case closed, go build a
sandcastle for chrissake.”

“Okay, I will, but while I’m here, if there was something I could do …”

“Here’s something you can do,” Boulie said, “Make sure your wife doesn’t catch
you working while you’re on vacation – Again. Remember that stunt you pulled in New
York last summer? I tell ya Menshik, I’d be a lot more careful than you if I was married to
a veterinarian.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”
“Isn’t a lot of her job removing testicles?” A final burst of raucous laughter as Menshik hung up the phone.

So that was that, she killed herself. “Come on Kelly, shall we head back?” He reached for the hand that did not hold the ice cream cone, but which nevertheless had chocolate chunks in its palm.

It was strange though, he thought, about her jumping with the cat.

Inside the big Victorian house Menshik and Kelly were directed to the office of the senior partner. Mr. Thompson wore a trim, pin-striped gray suit and sat behind a great mahogany desk in a room lined floor-to-ceiling with shelves of law books. Menshik and Kelly sat across from him in matching burgundy arm chairs. Menshik, tall and broad shouldered, stretched out his legs to keep his knees from rising up higher than his seat. Kelly’s arms barely reached the edges of her chair as she rubbed her hands up and down the soft leather, making quiet humming sounds. On the corner of Thompson’s desk was a wooden model of a clipper ship with full sail and detailed riggings. A plaque on the ship said “To Thorsten Thompson from the Cape Cod Bar Association.”

One of Mr. Thompson's gray eyebrows arched skeptically as he looked at the pair of them, Menshik in his hiking shorts, Kelly in her knee-length Oshkosh overalls. “Is this an official investigation, Detective?”
Menshik smiled amiably when he answered. “Please excuse the informality, Mr. Thompson. My family is on vacation, you see, and since I was out this way, I promised my lieutenant I'm stop and make a few inquiries. Just some routine questions.”

“I see.” Mr. Thompson knitted his brow as if he didn't really see, and drummed his fingers on the desk for a moment. After a pause he said, “Yes, she was our client. I suppose I can tell you that. We were quite shocked by the news of her death. I had no inkling she was so depressed. In fact, she had an appointment to see me next Thursday.”

“The note said she was afraid of going blind,” Menshik said, "do you know what that was about?”

“Yes. She was suffering from macular degeneration in one eye. She was losing vision in the center. It was my impression that laser treatments seemed to have arrested that. I don't recall that she was in danger of going completely blind.”

Hmmmmmm, Menshik thought. “You mentioned she had an appointment next week. Can you tell me what she wanted to see you about?”

Mr. Thompson sniffed. "Well, truthfully, Mr. Menshik, I'm not sure I can. Naturally, we would be happy to help with any official investigation, but under the circumstances I'm afraid that —"

He stopped talking and stared at Kelly. She had come out of her chair, toddled to the desk and was now reaching her hands up to grasp the schooner. "Um, . . .that model is rather delicate, actually," he said.

Menshik was about to reach over and grab for Kelly, but he checked himself. Instead he leaned back in his chair and laced his finger across his stomach. "I understand
your reticence to discuss this Mr. Thompson, and I can see that we're disturbing you. But I assure you this is a real investigation."

“Well, . . . ah . . .,” Mr. Thompson's eyes were riveted on Kelly as the schooner slowly slid from the desk into her tiny hands.

Kelly held the model up toward her Dad. “BOAT,” she said.

Menshik smiled at her. “That's right, Sweetie.” He turned to Thompson. “You were saying Mr. Thompson.”

Thompson was leaning forward, trying to see over the great desktop to where Kelly now sat on the floor making little motor sounds. He sighed. “She was coming to see me to revise her will.”

“Revise her will?” Menshik's scalp tingled at the news. “Do you know why?”

Mr. Thompson rubbed his chin. “Well, I'd rather . . . ah, . . . perhaps you could you have your department fax me a letter of –”

“Now, Kelly, honey, be careful,” Menshik said to his daughter, who was obviously out of Thompson's view. “You remember what you did to Andrew’s model.” The little girl gave him a curious look. He smiled at the old lawyer. “You were saying she wanted to revise her will, Mr. Thompson. How many heirs did she have?”

Thompson frowned and sat back in his chair. “Just one. A nephew. He lives in the city. She had warned him that he would be disinherited if he continued to abuse drugs, and last week he was arrested for a third time. That's all I know, please believe me.”

Menshik stood up and reached down to his daughter. “Kelly, why don't we give the boat back to Mr. Thompson, OK, honey?” He gently pulled the schooner from the little
girl’s hands and set it squarely back on the desk top. He lifted Kelly and held her on one arm. “If you could just give me the nephew's name and address, Mr. Thompson, we'll be on our way.”

Menshik was excited. His instincts had told him something was funny about the old lady's death, and now he had some evidence that justified his suspicion. The note had said she was going blind, but in fact she wasn't. And the nephew had a clear motive to kill her before she cut him out of her will. Menshik felt that old fever again, that rush of exhilaration, the feeling that Amanda had called his “heroin.” He imagined calling Boulie and the Lieutenant and reporting the quite intriguing little fact he had uncovered on a seemingly very mundane case. Uncovered while on vacation, no less.

He carried Kelly out to the gate in front of the law office. “You were a big help to your Daddy, Honey Bear.” He kissed her cheek. “I think I'm gonna take you along on all my cases.” But Kelly wasn't listening to him, she was staring excitedly at something over his shoulder. She pointed behind Menshik.

“MOMMY!” she said. Menshik froze. “HI, MOMMY.” Menshik turned around slowly. Miranda was standing right behind them on the sidewalk. In one hand Miranda held a big shopping bag with *Sea Breeze Notions* printed on it, the other hand lay firmly on her hip, her head was tilted toward the side — the body language was not auspicious.

No trace of amusement showed in her voice when Miranda said, “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Uh, yeah.” Menshik smiled nervously and looked at his watch. “We were just heading off to meet you.”
Miranda stared at him. “From a law office? You were in a law office? You were supposed to be buying Kelly a milkshake.”

Menshik forced a chuckle. “Well, that milkshakes were kind of runny, we were thinking about suing.”

Miranda didn't laugh. Miranda didn't smile. Miranda didn’t even blink as she stared at him with those, dark, angry, beautiful eyes. She stepped close to Menshik, her head coming just even with his chest, and jabbed a finger into his ribs. “You were doing police work, weren't you?”

“Oh, well . . . actually I was just checking one thing, it was no big—”

“You promised me," she said. She shook her head slowly, her eyes never leaving his. “You promised me you wouldn't do this again.” For a long moment no one said anything. Abruptly she reached over and pulled the little girl out of his arms. “Come on Kelly, we're going back to the car.” She plopped Kelly on her hip, grabbed the shopping bag with her other hand shouldered her shopping bag grabbed Andrew by the hand and walked away as quickly as someone could who had two kids in tow, which in Miranda's case was pretty quickly, especially when she was really mad. And she was definitely mad.

Menshik stood there on the hot sidewalk feeling foolish and guilty. The exhilaration of his discovery about the nephew had melted like a fudge cycle dropped on a hot sidewalk. He followed his family down the narrow street.

That night it was a cold supper in two senses of that term: the fried chicken was left over and Miranda wasn't speaking to him. On top of the chill of her righteous wrath,
Menshik felt the dull weight of his own guilt. He had been a nitwit. He had promised that he would try to forget about his work on this vacation and concentrate on having fun with the family. And the whole thing with the old lady was stupid anyhow. What had he found out? That someone had a motive to kill her? A possible motive to kill her. What did that prove?

When they had finished tucking the kids into bunk beds in the tiny second bedroom, Miranda walked out to the cottage’s back deck. She sat in an Adirondack chair with her feet on the railing, staring off in the direction of the ocean. She pulled her sweater tight around her though the evening breeze wasn't very cool. Menshik stood a few feet behind her, over by the kitchen door.

"I'm sorry, Miranda. It was stupid of me — "

“What I cannot believe,” she said, “What I find truly amazing, is that you actually brought us to Provincetown so you do could do some police work.”

“No,” Menshik said. “That is absolutely not … entirely true.” She turned and stared at him with narrowed eyes. “I mean, it was your idea to come to the Cape,” he said.

Her voice was unusually slow and steady. “And this morning, when I said, ‘What shell we do today?’ you insisted on coming to Provincetown. ‘Great antiques,’ you Andrew will really like climbing the tower.’ And all you wanted was to get me out of the way for an hour while went off to investigate something.”

“But you love antique stores,” Menshik protested, knowing full well what a pathetically weak defense that was.

“That’s a pathetically weak defense and you know it.”
“Miranda, it was no big deal, I just thought it would take five minutes, it wouldn’t affect you or the kids.”

“Do you know how many times I’ve heard that before?”

He slumped into the other chair on the far side of the deck. “Look, you try to do your job the best you can. I’m trying to do mine. We both just want to make a good life for Kelly—”

“Oh, please don’t give me that crap about how you were just taking care of your family. Why do men use that lame excuse? It was about you — you were trying to be Super Cop, plain and simple. You’re just one of the young baboons fighting to be the alpha male in the troop, that’s all.” Menshik hated it when she resorted to zoological metaphors, especially when they were as apt as that one.

Miranda was quiet for a long time, staring out to where the white flash of the waves was visible as they broke against the dark beach. After a few minutes of silence, Menshik risked moving his own chair over next to hers. She made no reaction to his approach, which Menshik knew could be either a very good sign or a very bad sign, and that his only real option was to wait to find out which. Finally, she let out a long, weary, obviously deliberate, but not entirely inauspicious, sigh.

“What were you doing anyway? What could a Boston cop possibly find useful in a Provincetown law office?”

He told her about the old woman, about her jump from the balcony, about her taking the cat with her out of fear for its loneliness, about how all of this seemed implausible to him.
“That’s not so strange,” Miranda chided, “I have plenty of clients who would believe their pets couldn’t live without them. People get pretty nutty where their pets are concerned.”

"The funny thing is," Menshik said, "she wasn't holding the cat when she fell. It landed several feet away."

"Of course she wasn't holding the cat, you bonehead. It would have jumped out of her arms as soon as they started falling. No cat is stupid enough to let you carry it to its death."

"Oh, I see," he said. He thought about it for a moment. “Well, then, I suppose that I, unlike the cat, am being pretty stupid here. And I really, really do apologize for that.” Carefully, he reached his hand over toward the arm of her chair and let the tip of his little finger rest on the back of her hand. Gently, he brushed his finger up and down the length of hers.

“Well, I have always known that you were stupider than the average cat.” She raised her own little finger and trapped his under hers. They stared together out at the breakers for a while.

Menshik sighed. “I can’t believe I caused all this trouble over a dead cat,” he said. Miranda looked up at him. “What do you mean, dead cat?” she asked.

“What do you mean, ‘What do I mean?’ I just told you she took it with her when she jumped off the balcony.”

“And it died?” she asked.
He stared at her. “It fell thirty two stories and cracked it’s head, how could it not die?”

“It cracked it’s head?” she said, “You know for a fact that that cat’s skull was cracked?”

“Pretty sure, yeah.” Menshik studied his wife’s face as much as he could in the faint light from the kitchen window. “Why? Do you think there’s something strange about that?”

She bit her lower lip and looked away from, back out at the ocean. “No. Nope, never mind,” she said. She pulled her legs up under the sweater and wrapped her arms around her knees.

“Miranda,” his said slowly, in a voice he tried to keep low and steady, “why are you asking me if the cat was dead?”

"Never mind, it's nothing." She stood up, pushed her chair back, and walked determinedly through the screen door into the cottage. Menshik felt that little tingle is his scalp again.

“Miranda!” He followed her into the kitchen. “What is it? You know something, don't you? Some veterinary thing. Come on, what's bothering you about the cat dying?”

She stood pressed up against the sink, facing the wall, her hands across her elbows as if hugging herself. She gave a long, low moan of frustration. “O-o-o-o-h, now you've got me doing it.”

“Doing what?” He came up behind her. "Come on, tell me.”

“I'm not going to help you do police work on vacation,” she said.
“Miranda, please, tell me what you're thinking.”

“No, I won’t.”

His big hands covered her delicate shoulders. “Please, Miranda, I'm begging you.”

She turned around to face him, arms folded across her chest. “No you're not,” she said.

“Not what?”

“Not begging me. If you were begging me, you'd be on your knees.”

“What?”

“When you beg someone you're supposed to be on your knees.”

Menshik blinked at her. “You can’t be serious.”

"Oh, yes I can.” She pointed at the floor. “If you want my help, beg on your knees.”

“What did I do to deserve to be humiliated?”

She raised a hand and started counting on her fingers. “You broke a promise about working on vacation; you brought us to Provincetown on false pretenses; you caused a fight that almost ruined our vacation; you took our sweet, innocent little daughter to an investigation —“

“Okay, okay,” he said, “I’m going.” He sighed. The floor was hard and the cracked linoleum pinched his bare knees. Even in this position his head came up level with her chest.

“Are you satisfied?”

“Well, it has to look sincere,” she said.
Menshik suppressed the urge to describe something he would *sincerely* like to do at that moment. He considered for a second what he should look like. He remembered something he had seen as a kid, some medieval painting that had hung in his parish church. Extending both arms straight out from his sides, he held his hands palms upward, faced his wife, tilted his head, and furrowed his brow in exaggerated pain: *The Agony of Saint Menshik*. “Now,” he said, “I am on my knees, as you demanded. I am truly begging. Miranda, please tell me about the cat.”

She looked down at him with a gleeful smile. "Gee, I really like you like this.”

“Don't push it, lady!”

“OK," she said, "here's the thing — the cat should not have died, certainly not of a fractured skull."

“I told you, it fell thirty-two stories," Menshik said. He stood up, rubbing his knees. “How could it not die?”

Miranda shook her head. "It doesn't matter if it fell mile. When a falling cat reaches terminal velocity it fans out its legs, they form a sort of air break and slow down the fall. When it lands the cat usually survives, though it may get a chest injury. In fact, there’s a name for injuries cats get when they fall from tall buildings: Highrise Syndrome. But whether it’s alive isn’t the important part.”

“So what’s the important part?”

“A cat falling a great distance does not fracture it’s skull. Think about it.”
He did think about. And it made him scowl and put a hand across his eyes, “Of course not. Of course it wouldn’t crack it’s head, a cat would land on its feet. How could we not have remembered that? No wonder this damn thing sounded strange to me.”

“Somebody hit that cat over the head before it fell,” she said. Menshik nodded and stared down at the floor. “What do you think this means?”

“I think it means she was killed by her nephew to stop her from cutting him out of her will. He used the cat for cover. It would have been easy to pick her up, lay the cat on her chest, and throw them both off the balcony. He waited until someone was walking below so there would be a witness that both bodies fell together. It would make suicide seem a lot more plausible.”

Miranda sat down at the Formica covered table and leaned her head against her hand. “Does this mean we have to go home? Cancel our vacation?”

“No,” he said, “it just means I need to make one phone call tomorrow." He smiled at his wife. “With your permission, of course."

“Well,” she said coolly, “it might be possible for you to get my permission. Let’s see you do that begging thing again.”