

ESTHER M. FRIESNER

CHESTNUT STREET

THE WEATHER WAS remarkably warm for November; everyone on Chestnut Street said so. It didn't matter that it was only the first of the month. Hopes for a mild autumn could be turned into pipedreams promising a mild winter to follow. {This despite the fact that years and years of past experience should have taught the most optimistic resident that the only thing less predictable than Massachusetts weather was the policy of the Planning and Zoning Commission. No matter: Wishful thinking carried weight on Chestnut Street.

Mr. Budd was raking up the dead leaves in his front yard and enjoying the sunshine when the yellow cab came driving slowly down the street. A cab on Chestnut Street was as rare a sighting as a unicorn or a Martian or a Democrat. This was Boston suburbia: Either you had a car for every family member over the age of sixteen or you had family rows about it that the neighbors could hear. That would never do, ergo you got the cars. So long as there was a facade to be shored up and neighborly opinion to be feared, who needed cabs?

Mr. Budd leaned his pudgy hand on the butt-end of his rake, then rested his equally pudgy chin atop it. "I wonder who that's come for?" he asked the air. He decided that now was as good a time as any to take a break from his chore and settled down for some leisurely snooping.

Across the street from the Budds' chocolate brown pseudo-Colonial stood an identical sage green model, the Starrett place. Chestnut Street was a cul-de-sac kingdom designed and built by a developer who produced houses on the same limited-options principle that Burger King applied to, yes, burgers: Offer the buyer control over some minor cosmetic aspects of the project -- exterior paint-job, single or double front door, hold the pickle, hold the lattice -- and he went away convinced he'd just built his dream house {Ayn Rand, thou shouldst be living at this hour!}.

In her front yard, Mrs. Valerie Starrett was heading her mums with the grim, dutiful air of her Puritan ancestors at the hangings of the Salem Village witches. As she decapitated each spent flower she shook her head over it dolorously, as if her gardening shears were the fiery sword of Eden's guardian angel, wielded more in sorrow than in anger. She too paused in her day's occupation to consider the oncoming cab.

Oncoming was a generous evaluation. Oncrawling would have been more accurate, had it been a word to begin with. The vehicle couldn't have been going more than five miles per hour. Part of Mrs. Starrett's spirit approved mightily -- she was seventy-two, and in her opinion time zipped by fast enough without automobiles trying to do the same. Another part deplored the fact that such pokiness probably meant the driver was lost. In her opinion, a cab that had any business being on Chestnut Street in the first place should know where it was going and

go there with all due celerity. Cruising cars were the hallmark of burglars, "casing the joint" as the late Mr. Starrett would say. (He had been addicted to old detective movies and had even worn a trenchcoat for a while until Mrs. Starrett put a stop to that nonsense.)

The cab cared nothing for the hound-like, prying gaze of Mr. Budd or the pursed lips of Mrs. Starrett. It continued to inch its way down Chestnut Street until it came to a stop in front of #34, which was the Gaye house. The right rear door opened and a skeleton got out.

You could tell it was a real skeleton. Even the Kittredges, who lived across the street from the Gayes and didn't have a cataract-free eye between them, could see that much. The Gaye house, blue with white trim, was fronted by a fieldstone fence, all dark gray stones. There were also several outsize garbage bags leaning against the outer face of the stone wall, leftovers from Halloween -- the decorative black sort that looked like wickedly grinning bats when you stuffed them with leaves or old newspapers, and the orange kind that looked like giant jack o' lanterns. The skeleton was white, and the blue, gray, black and orange background made it stand out so that there was no way you could identify it as anything but what it was.

There wasn't an ounce of flesh on it, nor any scrap of winding sheet. It wore neither deeply cowled black monk's habit nor bowtie nor bikini. It stood in the street, skull turning slowly to left and to right, one bony hand still poised on the open taxi door. The empty eye-sockets rested for a heartbeat on the Kittredges.

They saw that all right, too. Mrs. Kittredge's scream was loud enough to make the houses all up and down Chestnut Street yield up their living in much the same way as the sea is advertised to yield up its dead come Judgment Day. To borrow a phrase, some came running. To coin another, some got one good gander at the biding bones and kept running until they were well past the skeleton and all the way down to the far end of the street, where the cul-de-sac gave on Linden Way, which was a thoroughfare.

Mostly, though, the people stood in their own front yards and goggled.

Somebody said "Holy shit!" Somebody else said "Whoa!" Both of these local commentators were Denny and Sam, the teenaged sons of the McGraw household, widely suspected among the older residents of Chestnut Street of being a bad influence on their younger brother Matthew, his mother's mid-life crisis baby, a tender tad of only seven summers.

Miss Talmadge, who had the yellow house with her cousin, Miss Pennington, began to say the Lord's Prayer until the sound of those words seemed to draw the skeleton's attention. One good, steady once-over from those lightless sockets and Miss Talmadge shut up fast.

A little time passed. Mothers of small children began to fidget on their front steps. It was a Tuesday and their watches told them it was five after three. The

school bus would be turning onto Chestnut Street at twenty past, just the way it did every weekday, barring breakdowns. What would the children think? How would they react? Every mother's heart chilled at the thought of hysterically shrieking little ones, mentally scarred for life by sight of the grisly visitor.

Every mother's inner imp whispered that a more likely scenario was the kids deciding en masse that the skeleton was A: A cinematic special effect; B: Way cool; C: Late. Halloween was yesterday.

The unpredictable reactions of children aside, there were more practical matters to consider: The cab was blocking the road. The school bus would never be able to get past it to make its roundabout turn in the circle at the end of Chestnut Street.

Mrs. Corinne Halpern had one of the houses on the circle and a little girl in third grade. She never even allowed Emily to watch the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers for fear of nightmares, so she was definitely opposed to the child seeing this ambulatory boneyard. She took a deep breath, anchored her upper teeth to her lower lip -- the better to strengthen her resolve -- and marched right up to the driver's side of the cab.

"I'm sorry, but you're going to have to --" she began. And that was all she did. She never finished. There was no driver, though a set of assorted keys was lodged firmly in the ignition, with a red-dyed rabbit'sfoot dangling from the chain. On the dashboard was one of those crownshaped air fresheners (which Miss Pennington thought looked darling, but which Miss Talmadge had flatly banned from their Buick sedan, insisting that the item was the trademark of the Latin Kings and was death or worse for anyone not of the gang to display). On the seat was a beaded wooden cover supposed to grant the driver relief from backache and buttnumb. The rest was silence.

Mrs. Halpern gave a little mew of distress over her discovery and dashed back into her house, slamming the door behind her. Emily would have to grow up some day.

For some reason, Mrs. Halpern's aborted sally into heroism became the galvanic inspiration for her neighbors. Mr. Budd laid down his rake, Mrs. Starrett set aside her shears and struggled up from her knees from her place among the mums, the Kittredges linked hands more adamantly than they had that long-ago evening when they had gone to tell her father that yes they were getting married now. All up and down Chestnut Street, the forces of neighborhood solidarity converged on the skeleton and the cab. Several people brought out their cellular phones with 911 keyed into the autodial, just in case.

They formed a sort of human amoeba around the interloper, leaving a nice big breathing space between themselves and the bones. The skeleton surveyed the crowd first from left to right, then right to left. It took a few steps forward, away from the cab. Its feet clinked and scraped on the pavement like windchimes still stuck in the shipping box. Those people most directly in its path took a corresponding number of steps backwards. The skeleton stood still, arms at its

sides, waiting.

"I wonder what it wants?" Mr. Budd said out loud. He was the neighborhood's lowest common denominator, an excellent source if you wanted to hear the obvious stated While-U-Wait.

"Who it wants, more likely," Mrs. Starrett rumbled darkly. "I always knew my time would come, but I never thought it would come in a yellow cab."

"I don't think -- I don't think it's who -- what you think it is," said Miss Talmadge, who had read all of Emily Dickinson with no discernible signs of self-improvement. "I mean, wouldn't it have a scythe or -- or at least a sickle?"

"Should I go back in the house and bring out the chess set?" Denny asked Sam. (Denny went to movies. Lots of movies. Even the foreign ones where you had to read stuff across the bottom of the screen.)

"Badminton," Sam corrected. "Or maybe Twister. Yeah, that's it, Twister!" (Sam went to lots of movies too; silly ones, no reading required.)

In all this time, no one had opened the door of the Gaye house. They were at home -- you could tell because both cars were in the driveway. Mr. Gaye worked from his home office. Mrs. Gaye took care of their only child, an infant. Half of the neighborhood couldn't tell you whether it was a boy or a girl. They had seen Mrs. Gaye come home from the hospital two months ago with something wrapped in a yellow blanket, and that was the last they'd seen of mother or child. Mr. Gaye did the shopping. If Mrs. Gaye ever took the baby out for an airing, it must have been at night.

And that was when it all came clear to Mrs. Starrett. "It's not here as Death," she declared to the populace. "It's here as Justice!" Most of the people near her responded with one voice: "Huh?"

"Oh, I see, I get it, I understand what she's saying." Mr. Budd bobbed his balding head, sending small semaphoring flashlets of light off into the air from his black-rimmed glasses. "Skeleton in the closet, yeah, that's it. Only it's come out of the closet, knocking at the door, chickens come home to roost, sure, I know."

The meatless chicken in question cocked its skull to one side (truly a less than winsome mannerism when performed without benefit of epidermis) and regarded Mr. Budd in an inquiring manner. Those persons standing nearest the apparition found themselves automatically mimicking the gesture, until the neighbors standing opposite them felt the urge to adjust the horizontal and the vertical hold knobs on life.

But if the skeleton gave every indication of wanting to hear Mr. Budd's theory expounded at length, the flesh-bearing bones all around it needed no further footnotes. They saw, they got it, they understood as well. A wisp of a whisper

passed through the crowd, waxed fat, multiplied itself, and populated Chestnut Street after its own kind.

"-- killed the baby! I always said there wasn't anything right about those people from the minute they moved into this neighborhood!"

"-- adopted. Illegally! They bought that child on the black market and --"

" -- knows that child is as black as the ace of spades! She used to teach in Roxbury, you know, and she was up to no --"

"-- his girlfriend's bastard, which he forced his wife to accept! And girlfriend's the word, because if that little slut was older than sixteen, I'm a--"

The racket rose. The skeleton stood in the midst of it, an islet of calceate calm. For the most part, the neighbors continued to bat about various speculations as to the specific sin which had brought this clattersome caller to the threshold of chez Gaye, although Denny and Sam McGraw spent their breath in a slowly heating argument as to whether the skeleton belonged to a man or a woman. Denny claimed you could tell from the pelvis, but he had forgotten exactly how you could tell {in much the same way that far too many people refuse to recall whether it's "Wine before beer, never fear" or "Beer before wine, everything fine," pace Robert Benchley.}. Then Sam made a whole string of very bad and relatively smutty puns about pelvises and there went that stab at amateur forensics.

It was at the very moment that Mr. Budd was holding forth as to the extremely snippy way Mr. Gaye had treated him while hustling the little missus to the hospital (" -- just asking if the baby was planned or, you know, one of God's blessed little accidents, being neighborly, and doesn't do more than snarl about what a hurry they're in and --" ) and Denny was trying to get Sam's mind and mouth out of the gutter through Twelve-Step Noogie Therapy that the door of the Gaye house o Mrs. Gaye stepped out. She was holding a baby in her arms. A live ba A white baby [well, rosy peach, to be precise). A cheerful, plump squirmy baby in possession of its father's eyes, hair, and nose, and mother's complexion, chin, and mouth.

Mrs. Gaye's mouth. Quite a mouth, there. Especially when Mrs. Gaye's ears scooped up the last few comments and speculations from the neighbors' overactive tongues. The things that woman said! The name she called them! {Well, how were they supposed to know she'd been visiting a sick sister with the infant? Chestnut Street harbored no Nosy Parkers, nosirree-bob ma'am!) It was a darn good thing that the bab, was too young to repeat any of it, or the child would have wound attending nursery school with a bar of Ivory soap permanently lodged in its mouth.

Mr. Gaye emerged from the house, drawn by the sound of his wife's tirade. He looked half-asleep -- a normal condition for fathers of infants -- and half-shaven, but fully alert to the possibility of his hel going into core

meltdown right in the middle of Chestnut Street. He one hand on her shoulder, divested her of the baby, and asked what wrong.

She told him.

Mr. Gaye listened and nodded, then walked down his front steps, baby still on one shoulder. He walked through the front yard, out the in the stone wall fence, and right up to the skeleton. As for the bones, they. remained motionless and silent. If some cosmic force had sent them to #34 to embody Justice, said cosmic force had some change coming.

"Did my agent send you?" Mr. Gaye inquired.

The skeleton was mute on that subject.

"Guess not," Mr. Gaye murmured. "Should've listened; everyone misses a deadline now and then. Oh well. Never mind." He started back toward the house, but paused and turned before he reached the stone wall. "Is there anything I can do to help you?" he called to the skeleton.

A loud snort from his wife overrode any reply the bones might have given. She strode down the steps, over the jolly greensward, past her husband and offspring, and past the skeleton as well. Her goal, like that of Mrs. Halpern before her, was the cab. Unlike Mrs. Halpern, she was neither cowed nor quailed by the sight of a driver's seat sans driver. She didn't give a frilled fig for what wasn't there; she was only concerned with what was. Or what should be. She was practical, was Mrs. Gaye, in all matters save the one long-ago bout of March Hare madness that had allowed her to marry a writer.

Something stuck out from under the front seat on the passenger's side. Mrs. Gaye yanked open the cab door and made a swan dive for it. She stood up brandishing a clipboard in a nice recreation of Perseus with the Head of Medusa.

"Thirty-four Chestnut Place, goddamit!" she hollered at the skeleton. She then flung the clipboard back into the cab, slammed the door, strode back into her house and slammed that door for good measure.

Silence took out a rent-to-own lease on Chestnut Street.

Still holding the baby, Mr. Gaye shrugged. It might have been intended as an expressive shrug, but if so it badly wanted the attentions of an editor. The baby cooed and gurgled, then spit up on Daddy's shoulder just to reestablish who was who and what was what. Mr. Gaye grinned sheepishly at the neighbors. "Heh," was all he had to say before he too went home. It wasn't much of an expository passage, but since this was one occasion where he wasn't being paid by the word, who could blame him?

The bare bones seemed to take their cue from Mr. Gaye's retreat, for while the neighbors thrummed and mumbled amongst themselves, the skeleton eased itself back into the cab and closed the door after it.

The cab glided away up Chestnut Street just as the school bus came barreling down. The cab drove straight and true up the very middle of the street, avoiding favoritism in the matter of traffic lanes. The school bus hewed to the right, but Chestnut Street was narrow and there was still a significant measure of PVO {Potential Vehicular Overlap}. However, at the point where all present held their breath in horror, the cab slid itself softly through the school bus at the point of supposed impact and came out the other side as easily as a needle passing through Jell-O[™].

The bus stopped at its wonted dropoff points and the debarking schoolchildren spilled out, making loud the welkin ring on Chestnut Street {The Planning and Zoning Commission had approved limited daylight welkin-ringing for this area}. If they noted an air of fear or anxiety or residual heebie-jeebies clinging to their parents, they tabled all relevant inquiries in favor of more pressing demands, i.e.: "What's for snack?" and "Lemme inna house, I gotta go!"

As for the cab and its passenger, they were gone.

In their ones and twos, the neighbors withdrew, each to tend his own vine and fig tree (or, in the case of Mrs. Starrett, mum patch). Mr. Budd went back to his yardwork. He raked together quite a large pile of leaves, chivvied them into the outspread tarp, bundled them up, and dragged them to the large compost pile at the back of his property.

Duty done, he went back into the house to take a well-earned rest. He lingered a few moments before the open refrigerator door, dithering over whether to make it a lemonade or a beer and muttering under his breath about these fool young men incapable of controlling their wives. He concluded that he could give young Mr. Gaye some lessons on that score, damned if he couldn't. He made it a beer.

He had settled himself and his beer comfortably into the dependable embrace of the La-Z-Boy when the doorbell rang. Grumbling, he answered it and found that there was no one on his doorstep and nothing beyond save an unobstructed view of the neighborhood.

Well, nothing beyond that one could see, but certainly something to be heard, namely a friendly voice in his ear to inquire: Anybody call for a cab?

Something rattled somewhere in a house bought and paid for by someone respectable on Chestnut Street.

Most likely not, but it's obvious that she knows her way around Addams's territory (and what's more, unlike the male half of our species, if she got lost she wouldn't hesitate to ask for directions, either).