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The Sign of the Times

a Mavis Davis mystery

by William M. Razavi

Lights. A streetlight emits a halo of light on a bench. In the background are two desks, each lit in a silhouette-like shadow, one with a detective behind it and the other with a detective leaning up against it. A neon light flickers "VACANCY" in the background.

Music. Nothing familiar, nothing distinct, like the hint of a tune that makes you think you know the rest but then disappears into another tune.

A woman, Mavis Davis, enters wearing a cliché trenchcoat and fedora and takes a place as a spot of light forms around her.

MAVIS: Mavis, you've gotta read the signs around you. This is no world for vacant stares. No room for trust. No room for anything.

(The vacancy sign flickers out. Another woman steps out next to the sign, gives it a good smack and steps back into the shadows. The light flickers again and comes back on this time with an addition so that it reads "NO VACANCY". A dim spot of light illuminates the first detective, who for the sake of argument we can call Sam and afterward a second dim light, maybe from a desk lamp, gives some light to the second detective, who for the sake of more argument we'll call Phil.)

SAM: There was a dame.

PHIL: *There* was a dame.

MAVIS: There was a woman. Hardly a woman, a girl, really, but then again something said to me this was no innocent kid no matter what her age. Maybe no one's ever as innocent as we think innocent should be. Funny, how we like to think naïve is the same as not being guilty of some sin. Still, this woman wasn't guilty of anything either...at least, not yet. I could tell she was up to something. I wondered what she was concocting in her mind that made her seem so bent on being guilty of something.

SAM: I wondered if that was her real hair color. A color like that, so perfect, didn't seem like it should happen in nature. Not in the nature I'd seen. Real people aren't that...crisp. She was like a painting, too distinct, too right on the money to be real. No, that couldn't be her real hair color and she didn't care if it was too perfect to be true. That was her thing. She wasn't hiding the fact that she was hiding herself.

PHIL: I wondered if she needed help walking in those shoes. They didn't seem like they could sustain movement. Shoes like that, they aren't made to walk around in. They're made to stand still until they've made their point and then they go back to wherever they came from until the next time the point needs to be made. These shoes, this dame, they made their point and so did she. But then she moved and that...upset my

expectations, you can say. She could move, not far and not fast but she only needed to take a few steps. She only wanted to take a few steps. Point made. Point taken.

PHIL (*Cont'd*): This was no ordinary dame walking an ordinary beat. She was going to be different. She was going to be dangerous.

SAM: I wondered if that dress on that dame came with a price...and if that price was measured in dollars or blood.

PHIL: I wondered if those Veronica Lake eyes were hiding something. They had to be. Even if all they were hiding was emptiness.

SAM: I wondered if there was a thought going through that pretty head. Was there a plan there or was she playing me by ear?

PHIL: I wondered...

SAM: I wondered...

BOTH: But I didn't care.

SAM: She was wearing a red dress with a slit on the side that went as far as you can take a thing like that without making a dress useless. Her skin was perfect. Her hair shined in the night.

PHIL: The dress was blue, like her eyes. It seemed a little too elegant for the time and place, but I wasn't complaining. Who's to say this wasn't the time and place for a dame with a blue dress to turn things upside down?

MAVIS: Her dress didn't matter. It might have been green, but a dress is a dress.

(The dame walks up to the streetlight.)

DAME: The dress always matters. What you see is what you get—what you might get. What you get is whatever you see. It's important to see what you're getting and to show what you're prepared to give.

MAVIS: What am I getting?

DAME: What do you want?

MAVIS: What are you prepared to give?

DAME: What do you see?

MAVIS: You came to me.

DAME: Did I? I don't remember.

SAM: She marched into my office like she owned the place.

(Another woman, very similar to the Dame, in a red dress, walks into Sam's office.)

SAM: Like she owned me.

(Yet another woman, also very similar to the Dame, in a blue dress, walks into Phil's office.)

PHIL: She settled in like a warm summer breeze, but when she looked me in the eyes I felt a chill like she jabbed an icicle into my heart. Her skin was icy when she brushed up against me and when she kissed me I felt my soul being drained away.

DAME: I have a proposition.

SAM: She had a proposition. I liked the sound of that.

MAVIS: We're getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren't we?

DAME: You like to take things slow?

MAVIS: I'm not in a hurry.

DAME: I am. You *should* be.

PHIL: She was pushy. I liked that.

SAM: She was soft. I liked that.

MAVIS: You want to get into my head or do you want to hire me?

DAME: Can't I do both?

MAVIS: You pay me, you can do what you want with your time. Pay me by the hour and you can take as much time as you'd like to get to the point.

DAME: I don't like to beat around the bush.

MAVIS: You could have fooled me.

DAME: You're in a hurry now?

MAVIS: If this is gonna take a while then I'm gonna need some coffee.

DAME: By all means.

SAM: She poured herself a stiff glass of bourbon and put it away like she meant it. I had to respect that.

PHIL: She made a flask appear like magic. It could have been pure poison but I would have taken a shot of anything from that woman and she knew it. I had to respect that.

DAME: You take sugar with your coffee?

MAVIS: You had a proposition.

DAME: You want to skip past your addiction and get to work? I can respect that.

MAVIS: I'll take the coffee just the same, but let's get on with the job.

DAME: I want you to follow me.

MAVIS: That's it? That's the job?

SAM: It seemed easy enough. Too easy.

PHIL: I would have followed her anyway. Keep an eye on her? Seemed too good to be true for paying work.

MAVIS: Why do you want to be followed?

DAME: Questions aren't part of the job.

MAVIS: Then there's no job.

(The Dame and Mavis stare each other down.)

DAME: You don't need the work?

MAVIS: I don't need to follow you without knowing why and find myself being followed without knowing why. I don't like surprises.

DAME: The detective business is a poor choice if you don't like surprises.

MAVIS: I don't like unpleasant surprises.

DAME: Are there pleasant surprises in this business?

MAVIS: No.

DAME: Maybe you should find another line of work.

MAVIS: Times are tough. You take what you can get.

DAME: Maybe. But maybe you just want to know the answers. Is that it?

MAVIS: Am I on the clock yet?

DAME: I have to see if you're up to the job.

MAVIS: Then let's get to the point. You want to be followed. Why?

DAME: I want to forget someone...a man...my husband.

MAVIS: You want someone rubbed out? You've got the wrong woman for the job.

DAME: I'm afraid you've got the wrong idea. He's already been rubbed out, in a sense. I just can't seem to complete the procedure. I need to forget him, to remove him from my memory. I need someone's help for that. I need your help.

SAM: It wasn't the straightforward proposition I was used to. It seemed impossible... but I was looking for something impossible.

PHIL: She made it seem simple enough, even though I knew it would be harder than that. She would make it worth my while. At least, she was willing to make me think she would make it worth my while and right now that was enough. A man can live for a long time on the promise of something even if it never comes true. She was promising and I was willing to believe. We're all suckers in the end, but maybe it's worth it to believe in something for a moment even if it's not something grand.

MAVIS: I'm not sure there's anyone in the line you need.

DAME: I think if there's anyone up for the job, it would be you.

MAVIS: I don't know how to clean up someone's memory.

DAME: But you always want answers. And here's a question worth answering. Can you help me forget someone?

MAVIS: I don't know where to start.

DAME: Follow me. Find a way to make me forget.

MAVIS: This isn't a normal case. I can't ask for a normal price.

DAME: You'll get more than you ask for, you can be sure of that.

MAVIS: That's what I'm afraid of.

SAM: I followed her around like she asked. It wasn't a hardship case for me and she didn't turn out to be a hardship case either. She had a fancy life on the up and up, but something had to be fishy there.

PHIL: I followed around closely. Too closely, you might say. Never let her out of my sight if I could. More than once kept her as close as you can get. Her ice melted a little. I thought I might catch a lucky break with her...had to believe that, anyway...just to keep going.

MAVIS: I followed her like I said I would, went from fancy apartments and cocktail parties to a day at the beach to a night at the opera to hotspots and clubs to dive bars and nights outside sleazy motel windows. I followed her as she sank and rose and bobbed around trying to drown something out of herself, followed her as she changed herself from person to person and slowly vanished into herself, followed her as she cried by herself in darkened alleys and screamed out his name in abandoned warehouses and watched her as she could never shake the memory out no matter how many other names it seemed she could substitute in his place. I wondered if this was a case at all or just a game of masochism I was being asked to take a part in. Every week I got my cash just the same and the money was good. I took other cases. I still watched her. I did what I could to expunge the record in her mind. But there was only so much I could do in a hurry and she seemed to be in a hurry.

SAM: She seemed set to self-destruct. I couldn't stop her and I began to suspect there was something else going on that would take me down with her if I didn't find out what it was soon.

PHIL: I went around the bend with her, got caught up in her scheme, like she knew I would. I guess we're all suckers for the dame, just waiting for the right dame to come around and make a guy feel like he's special, even if the special isn't a happy kind of special.

MAVIS: I thought about what she'd said. She wanted to forget a man. How do you dismantle a person? How do you systematically remove someone from your memory? How do you take apart an idea?

SAM: I knew something was up and I had figured out the scam. I knew my part in it and I knew I didn't like it. That's what I knew. What she didn't know was that I was about to blow her whole operation sky-high. I had the inside track on her at last. She thought she was playing me, but I was playing her too. The guy on the other end couldn't be happier with how it turned out. His jewels were safe in his safe and there was just one thing left to do and that was to watch to see how far she'd fall when I let her drop.

PHIL: She thought I knew what was up and I did know what was up even though I refused to believe what was going on.

PHIL (*Cont'd*): What she didn't know was how far I had gone and how much further I'd have been willing to go. She knew I knew the score, but what she didn't know was that I was game for the game. If I hadn't played it cool and quiet, maybe things would have turned out different. I have to believe that, I guess.

MAVIS: I didn't think it could be done, but I was wrong. You can make a memory disappear. It's a lot easier than it should be and yet harder than anything else I'd ever seen. It was the toughest job I'd ever taken, but she was right, I got much more than I asked for. I got a look at what it's like to pull out a fresh page and really mean it, to not even have to imagine the faintest impression from the page that came before it. I'm not sure I liked what I saw and I'm not sure I was supposed to. I did my job and I got paid. Mystery solved.

SAM: I could tell from the look in her eyes that she knew she was trapped. There was no way out of this situation for her. No good way. No way that would leave her untouched. She was desperate. She reached for the gun she thought was in her bag. There's always a gun in the bag. Not this time, though, because I knew there was always a gun in the bag and I knew she would go for it.

(Sam shoots the dame in red. They freeze.)

PHIL: Everybody's gotta die of something. No surprise there. I thought it might be better than this, but this is where we were going. I had to know what was going on, because it was my job to know what was going on. That's what I do. But I had to love her, too. That was my mistake. I wasn't being paid to love someone, at least I don't think I was.

(Phil kisses the dame in blue. A shot. They freeze.)

SAM: I looked in her eyes one last time.

PHIL: We all get that same look.

SAM: One part pain and hurt.

PHIL: One part rest and relaxation.

SAM: And then a blank stare into the night. And she was dead.

(The dame in red crumples to the ground.)

SAM: And I think to myself, 'there's a real waste of a good dame.'

PHIL: I tried to touch her one last time, to see if I could leave with one last bit of warmth from her, to see if she could believe in something too...but I was dead. And all the time I was looking at her in the eyes thinking, 'Now *there* was a dame.'

(Phil crumples to the ground at the feet of the dame in blue.)

MAVIS: I saw her again one last time. I wondered if I was the last piece in the puzzle that had to be taken away for it to work. She winked at me. I wondered if there was ever a puzzle to begin with.

DAME: I've got a proposition for you.

MAVIS: I take cases, not propositions.

DAME: I think you'll take this one.

MAVIS: What makes you so sure?

DAME: Because we're the same, you and I.

MAVIS: We aren't alike at all.

DAME: No, we're not the same kind of woman. You need to find the answers, it's your job and it's in your nature. I like to leave behind questions. It's how I get clear. No, we're not alike at all, you and I. It's just that...we're the same person.

(The Dame looks back at Mavis and winks again as she disappears into the shadows.)

MAVIS: I thought about what she said...what it might mean. Too much coffee and the mind plays tricks on you. You think you remember things that never happened and you don't remember things that *have* happened. Mavis, you've got to read the signs that are all around you. This is no time for emptiness, no time to clear out your files. Have to keep something in there if you're going to go on. The only way to forget a person is to forget yourself and to do that you'd have to...well, you'd have to become someone else or divide yourself until there was nothing left. Maybe that was the way she did it. Maybe she and I *were* the same. Maybe she and I *are* the same. I don't really think so, it's just that last cup of coffee coming back to haunt me. But from time to time I wonder about that woman, if she was happier without the baggage, if the baggage was ever really gone and if you can call it a life at all if you don't have something behind your eyes other than an empty stare.

The lights fade out leaving the neon light that flickers until it just reads "VACANCY."

Biographical Note:

William Mohammad Razavi was born in Tehran, Iran in 1973. William grew up in Texas where he graduated from Trinity University (BA 1995). He went on to earn an MFA in Playwriting from Brandeis University (1997). His play *Making Up For Lost Time* was workshopped at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA and was nominated for an ATAC Globe award in San Antonio, TX. His radio play *Wenceslas Square* was broadcast on WERS. Other plays include *Macbeth*, *The Next-To-Last-Flight of Amelia Earhart*, *Lusitania*, *The Private Life of Ernest Hemingway* and *The Ricky Harrow Pitcher Show*. He wrote and directed *The Complete Fragments of Menander: Some Assembly Required*, which was performed at the San Antonio Museum of Art in March 2008. He is a freelance writer and director whose film and theatre criticism has appeared in the San Antonio Current among other publication. An excerpt from his upcoming memoir *Turban Cowboy* was published in *Daily Life though World History in Primary Documents* (Greenwood Press, 2009).