

DEATH OF A WAITRESS

ANITA STUBBS

Nell, investigative reporter for the local paper, sat in her usual place in the corner booth facing the courthouse. The coffee shop, eerily quiet this morning, might as well have been draped in black. Shocked and saddened by the death of the restaurant's best-loved waitress, the customers drank their coffee in silence, remembering Suzanne. Still numb four hours after receiving the call, Nell shook her head in disbelief. Her friend had died overnight inside her burning house.

Suzanne and Nell, both recently divorced when they met five years ago, were not in the ordinary sense, best friends, but the two shared a few confidences. Suzanne's glitzy humor entertained Nell when there seemed nothing left in the world to laugh about. Appearing carefree, Suzanne listened to everyone else's problems, revealing precious little of her own personal life.

However, over a few drinks one night at the VFW, Suzanne disclosed to Nell some of the disturbing details of the breakup of her first marriage. She had quipped that night that it was a wonder she had gotten out of that one alive.

At other times, they laughed about her second divorce. "I can't help it if he wound up heart broke and busted," Suzanne said with her Dollie Parton giggle. "Hell, he shouldn't have been so irritating!"

"It's always the little things." Nell agreed.

"Yeah, sure was in his case—

"What, Dude has a small, uh, foot?"

"Yes ma'am, teeny little ol' foot!" The women laughed like teenagers at the absurd implication.

Suzanne's imitation of her second husband's long-legged, cowboy stride and the annoying way he ate his eggs every morning cracked Nell up every time Suzanne re-enacted the hilarious routine. Knife and fork in hand, noisily attacking a plate of fried eggs in a brutal criss-cross fashion, Suzanne often demonstrated the maddening breakfast ritual that finally sent her to the courthouse. The humorous memory of it dissolved instantly into sadness. *Suzanne gone!* Nell sat there shaking her head, the shock of the news still fresh, and the actuality of never seeing her friend again, or hearing her vivacious laughter, seemed impossible.

Driving to the site of the new Civic Center to interview the mayor, Nell thought about the details of the fire, sparse as they were. The fire department had received an anonymous call around three-thirty that morning. By the time they arrived, nothing remained of the house but a smoking heap of twisted metal and glowing embers. Inside, they found Suzanne's body. Investigative reports determining the cause of the fire would be forthcoming, but Nell planned to visit Chief MacDonald anyway.

After leaving the Civic Center site, situated next to the Justice Center, she stopped to talk to Sheriff Jackson. She met him at the front door, as he was leaving.

"What about Suzanne?" Nell got right to the point. The man was always in a hurry to get somewhere.

“Bad deal,” he said, shaking his head, “but not surprising.”

“Not surprising? I was stunned.” Nell suddenly could not hold back the tears. She took a Kleenex from her purse and dabbed her eyes. “What do you mean, not surprising?”

“She was a good ol’ girl, but *damn*, Nell, you have to admit, she made some bad choices!”

“In husbands, you mean? She just had some bad luck, that’s all, in both marriages. You never know a man til you marry him,” she said, defensively.

“No, not just in husbands—

“Everyone loved Suzanne! You just didn’t know her, Don.”

“I know she filed a complaint against that red-neck boyfriend of hers last week.”

“Gerald?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“What are you saying?” She craned her neck and stared at the man. “You don’t think the fire was an accident?”

He said nothing, just shrugged his shoulders.

“What was the complaint about?”

“He took her car without permission.”

“Is that all?”

“Well, it riled him up enough to threaten, and I quote, ‘to kill the bitch if I get my hands on her!’”

“Oh, that Gerald, everybody knows how he is, always ranting about something! He’s harmless.” She tucked the Kleenex into her purse.

“Maybe.”

“Where is he, do you know?”

“Yep, a deputy locked him up about an hour ago, found him stumbling drunk out at City Lake.”

“Again?” Nell shook her head at that little tidbit, and wondered if it meant something.

“Did Suzanne tell you about that crazy woman?”

“What crazy woman? Who?”

“The woman from Rockwall County, she didn’t tell you about her?”

“No!”

“She got it into her head for some reason that Suzanne was her husband’s mistress. The woman had been stalking her, thought her husband built Suzanne that house.”

Nell leaned forward, dropping both hands to her sides, her mouth falling open. “Well, that beats all I’ve ever heard!”

“There was always some kind of conflict going on with Suzanne.”

Nell ignored the comment, “We hadn’t talked in a week or two, other than just chitchat at the coffee shop. Suzanne never talked much about her personal life, anyway.”

“She called dispatch last week, asking for an officer to come out to her house. This woman had driven right up to Suzanne’s front porch, and laid down

on her horn, two-thirty in the morning! Once before that, Suzanne had reported her prowling all around her house, taking pictures.”

“Well, who is she?”

“Some nut. Not out of the mental hospital very long, and before that it was one rehab after the other.”

“Where is she now?”

“We’re checking on it, she was told to leave the county.”

“You think Suzanne was murdered?”

“I think there’s a possibility,” he said, glancing at his watch.

“Okay, Don, I won’t keep you. Call me if anything develops with Gerald.”

“He’s sleeping it off now, but I’ll talk to him a little later.”

“Oh, and when do you expect the autopsy report?”

“Probably next week, if I go pick it up.”

“Did you see Suzanne’s body?”

“No, I just got back from Austin.” He glanced at his watch again.

“I know you’re busy,” she said, walking away. “But call me later.”

All morning, Suzanne’s statement about being lucky to get out of her first marriage alive nagged at Nell. So, she stopped by the courthouse and asked for Suzanne’s first divorce file. “All I really want to see right now is the final decree,” she said. Shortly, she was directed to a table in the back of the room, where the file waited.

According to the court record, Suzanne had received a modest settlement from the sell of the couple’s home. Nell thought the amount paltry, considering the size of the couple’s assets at the time of the divorce. On top of that, she had been married to the man for more than twelve years. Obviously, Suzanne’s lawyer had a serious conflict of interest.. Nell found nothing that would motivate the ex-husband to murder her five years after the divorce, certainly in light of a court judgment so clearly in his favor. From the looks of things, Suzanne was the one with a motive for murder! He had married his secretary as soon as Texas law allowed, and left the state, according to Suzanne.

When she finished with the file, Nell asked to see the one from her friend’s more recent divorce. That folder contained just a few pages. Suzanne had represented herself, which amounted to no more than the filing and the one court appearance. In the uncontested divorce, Suzanne walked away with the house, including the Olympic size swimming pool, and all the money in the joint checking and savings accounts, as well as half of his stock portfolio. In short, Suzanne more than adequately recovered her losses from the first divorce.

At the fire station, Nell found Chief MacDonald in his office.

“I know this is probably premature,” she said, “but did you notice anything fishy about the house fire this morning? Any reason to suspect fowl play?”

“Won’t know til the arson team completes their report. You know that, Nell.”

“I know, but Suzanne was my friend,” she said, dismissing the perfunctory statement. “What do you think? Off the record, of course.”

“Well, I’d say the fire started downstairs, probably ruling out electrical, in my opinion. But like I said—”

“Did you see her body?”

“Of course.”

“Had she tried to get out of the house?”

“I really can’t comment, Nell. I’m sorry.”

“Was the body, uh,” she groped for the correct word. “Recognizable?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Badly burned?”

“No, not at all.”

Staggered by that statement, Nell stared at the man for a minute before asking, “Now, Mac, how odd is that?”

“Very.”

She left, baffled, having been under the impression that the body had been nothing but charred remains. *What had happened?*

As she drove home, her mind thumbed through the most recent conversations she had with Suzanne, searching for anything that contained a clue. Could Gerald have killed her in a drunken rage and set the house on fire, dragging her body inside after the fire had subsided? In his stupor, had he assumed the fire would rekindle, and consume the body? And there was the Rockwall County woman. What else had Suzanne failed to mention? Nell wondered.

The answering machine flashed, indicating three messages. The first one, from the sheriff. “Hey, call me.” The second one, her editor asking for the mayor interview. The third message was from Suzanne’s ex-husband. “Hello, this is Dude Hankins,” he said.

Immediately, she laughed at the image of Suzanne’s imitation, although the humor dissipated instantly, replaced by another image of Suzanne, dead. “Unbelievable,” she said aloud, contemplating the even more bizarre possibility that Suzanne may have been murdered. Nell replayed Dude’s message. “Please call me, but not at home, no, call me on my cell.” He rolled off a number too quickly to understand. “Uh, don’t call me at home now, but I just have to talk to you about Suzanne. I still loved that woman,” he blurted, his words distorted as he sobbed into the phone. Nell replayed his message. Still the phone number was not clear. She listened several times, and gave up.

She dialed the Justice Center. “You rang, Sheriff?”

“Gerald says he was fishing all night, with his brother. And the brother backs him up, said he left him, afoot, at the lake about seven this morning after he couldn’t get him to go home. The brother bailed him out of jail not more than ten minutes ago.

“How did Gerald take the news?”

“Not well.”

Nell went to the sheriff’s office early the next morning to go over the report about the woman stalking Suzanne. Her name was Joan Gantt. Nell quickly jotted down a couple of notes, as well as the name and address of the woman’s daughter, who interestingly lived less than a couple of miles from Suzanne’s house. Nell called the young woman, asking to stop by later in the afternoon.

Sitting in her small living room, Randi Gantt seemed embarrassed and nervous. "I didn't tell you my mother is staying with me, I'm afraid for anyone to know, because she was told to leave the county. I'm worried they'll think she had something to do with that house burning down, but she didn't."

"She's here, now?"

"Momma," Randi called out, "come in here and tell this lady what you told me."

Joan Gantt could not have weighed more than ninety pounds. She looked much older than the forty-nine years Nell saw on the county's report. A frail, bleached blonde, with dark circles under her eyes. Purple bruised splotched her arms. After introductions, Joan lit a cigarette and sat at the bar, which separated the kitchen from the living room.

"I thought Suzanne and my husband were having an affair, because I found her name in his wallet. Her having that new house and swimming pool, well, I just had a gut instinct that he had paid for it. I have a sense about things like that, don't I, Randi?"

"Momma tell her what you saw the night the house burned." Randi shook her head tiredly, and sent Nell a dismal look.

"That deputy told me that if I went back over there that I could get shot, that it was legal in Texas for a homeowner to shoot a trespasser," Joan continued. "He told me he told that woman if he was her, he'd unload a shotgun on me if I came back, so I wasn't going back. I'm not that crazy!" She lit another cigarette.

"But I drove by there, wasn't going to stop, or anything." She exhaled a cloud of smoke, then continued. "There was a man there, and they were arguing in the front yard."

"What did he look like? This man?"

"He was tall. I just drove by kinda slow to see whose truck was there. At first I thought it was my husband's."

"Momma, please. You know Daddy's been on the road for two weeks." Randi gave Nell an exasperated look, and shrugged her shoulders. "Daddy's a trucker, and he's gone most of the time," she explained. "That's why he had Suzanne's name and number, he knew she lived near me. One morning at the coffee shop, she told him to give her number to me, in case I needed anything, us being neighbors, and me by myself a lot."

"I can just hear Suzanne insisting that he give you her number, Randi, that's how she was." Nell was thankful she had the opportunity to speak favorably about her friend.

"What kind of truck?" Nell wanted to hear more about the mystery man, although this woman's credibility amounted to zero, and the man's existence most likely another of Joan's fantasies.

"It was a Ford 250, a lot like my husband's," she said. "It was maroon though. His is brown."

"Ex-husband. Daddy and Momma have been divorced for ten years, but Momma just can not accept it!"

"How do you know they were arguing, Joan?"

“Well, he had his finger in Suzanne’s face for one thing, shaking it at her, and was standing really close to her, towering over her, he’s real tall, and I saw him grab Suzanne’s arm.” Joan left the bar for a cup of coffee. “Would you like a cup?” she asked Nell.

“No, thanks. What time was this?”

“Oh, about sundown. You can’t mention my name in your paper, or to the sheriff, now,” Joan said, lighting another cigarette. “I can’t go back to Rockwall. I’ve lost my apartment, and have nowhere to stay but here. I hope nobody thinks I burned that house down.” Joan’s hand shook so badly ashes fell to the carpet. “I couldn’t stand being locked up again.”

“For now, everything you’ve told me is off the record,” Nell said. I’m sure the reports will prove it was all a tragic accident.” She hoped her words sounded convincing.

“Does anyone think it wasn’t?” Randi asked, chewing her nails. “An accident?”

“Not that I know of,” Nell lied.

“I don’t think it was,” Joan said. “I think somebody did it, but it sure wasn’t me!”

Nell did not know what to think about this Joan woman. She had come to question the daughter, hoping to learn more about the woman’s fixation on Suzanne. She had not expected to encounter the woman. Could Joan have invented the story to direct attention away from herself? Nell left more curious than ever.



Suzanne’s funeral service was at two o’clock the next afternoon, and by the time Nell arrived, the chapel was almost full. She looked around for a seat, finding one next to a cold sober and grief-stricken Gerald. He didn’t appear to notice her. She tapped his arm. “You doing okay, Gerald?”

“Yeah, pretty good, I guess,” he said, solemnly.

“Hard to believe we’re here.”

He took out his handkerchief and wiped fresh tears. “It’s all my fault too, I should have been with her, could have gotten her out of that house. I tell you one damn thing, Nell,” he lowered his voice, glancing around furtively, and leaned closer. “I ain’t touching another drop, I swear it! On Suzanne’s dead body, I’m through with alcohol!” He put his face in his hands and sobbed loudly.

Nell patted his arm.

Leaving the cemetery, she spotted Dude Hankins standing away from the others, near the entrance. She walked over to explain why she never returned his call.

“I was hoping I’d see you here.” His eyes darted around nervously and he appeared edgy, ill at ease.

“What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Just wanted to tell you how much I still care,” he looked toward the gravesite, “cared, for Suzanne.”

“Why tell me, Dude?”

“Because you were her friend, knew her about as well as anyone, I guess. I just wanted to talk to someone.”

“Congratulations on your new marriage.” She thought it was the appropriate thing to say, and wanted to change the subject.

“Oh, yeah, thanks.” He ducked his head.

“Suzanne wanted you to be happy, Dude.”

“Yeah,” he said, slapping his Stetson hat against his jeans, and digging the heel of his boot into the sand.

Gerald approached them from the rear, looking Dude up and down, before focusing on his face and finally speaking. “Can’t you leave her alone, even now?”

“Suzanne knew how I felt about her, just because our marriage was over, didn’t mean I was over her.”

“You drove her nuts, calling her all the time, sending them mushy cards. She thought after you remarried, you’d finally leave her alone, but didn’t change a thing!”

“She knew I’d do anything for her.” Dude glared down at Gerald. “That’s more than she could say for you! She couldn’t count on you for nothing. I told her if she ever needed anything, anytime, to call me, and I’d be there for her.”

“Well, you didn’t have nothin’ left that Suzanne wanted.” Gerald turned, heading back toward the gravesite. “You need to go on home and take care of your wife!” he called over his shoulder, raising his voice for everyone to hear.

Listening to the exchange, Nell was beginning to pity Dude’s new wife, Lynn. Suzanne said she was a little older than Dude and real desperate for a husband. “Where are you two living?” she asked.

“In a mobile home, on Ben Garrett’s horse farm.” Dude said, continuing to glare at Gerald’s departing back. “Ben is Lynn’s grandfather, and she sure took after him when it comes to horses. Wants her own ranch, don’t understand why I can’t just buy one.” He put his hat back on, squinting one eye against the sun. “I tell you, Nell, I wish I’d never remarried.”

“How many times now, Dude?”

“This one’s number four.” He jammed his hands in his jeans, and looked down at the ground, shaking his head. “She even went to see a lawyer about suing Suzanne, for half of the money I spent building that house, and all of my mutual funds.”

“Well, I’ve got work to do.” Nell remembered now why everyone avoided Dude. The man talked too much.

“I hear ya,” he said as she walked away.



The autopsy results stunned Nell. “Drowned? Did you say drowned?” That was the last thing she expected to hear when the sheriff called.

“Any sign of any other injury?” she asked.

“Yes, she had a head injury, was badly bruised over most of her back, with rope burns around her ankles. And the water in her lungs contained chlorine.

“Good Lord!”

"If you aren't sitting down yet, you better find yourself a chair," the sheriff continued.

"I'm sitting."

"Suzanne had a half a million dollar life insurance policy. Did you know that?"

"No! Why, that's preposterous. She had no immediate family."

"Guess who the beneficiary is?"

"I have no idea!"

"Dude Hankins."

"No!"

"Yeah, he took it out on her when they got married, and he's been paying the premium ever since."

Nell got up and began to pace. "I'd say that pretty much rules out anyone else, then."

"Money's always a motive."

"But there's another thing, and I got this information from an anonymous source." Nell saw no reason to implicate poor Joan Gantt, until she had to.

"Go on."

"Suzanne had a visitor, the evening before the fire, just about dusk. And they were arguing out in her front yard. The man was being very aggressive. They appeared to be having an altercation."

"Don't suppose your anonymous source recognized the man?"

"No, just that he was tall, and drove a maroon Ford 250 pickup."

"Well, you'll recall it was also an anonymous caller who reported the fire. We don't need any more anonymity, Nell." His derisive tone irritated her.

"I need to go," she snapped, out of patience with men in general. "There's something I want to check out."

"Just kidding, Nell, but this investigation is official now, a matter for law enforcement. You be careful, you understand?"

"Bye, Don."

She decided to visit Lynn Hankins, on the pretense that she was interested in buying a horse. It was time she met the woman, and the Garrett farm was just a few miles out of town. The mobile home appeared deserted, so she headed toward the stables, hoping to find Lynn there. Turning a corner, she spotted several pickup trucks parked near the roping pen.

She saw Dude first, standing next to a much taller man she did not recognize, and then she heard a loud round of laughter. Less than fifty yards away from the group, Nell stopped, taken completely by surprise at the sight of Gerald slapping Dude on the back, obviously finding something he said extremely funny. It was clearly a tight-knit gathering. No sign of the hostility she had witnessed between Gerald and Dude at the cemetery. Gerald and the other man, each one with a beer in his hand and facing her direction, were too engrossed in what Dude was saying, to notice her. It had all been performance, she realized, staged for her benefit. The next words reinforced that fact clearly.

"That Gantt woman's the one they'll blame, nobody suspects me, and the sheriff bought your fishing alibi." Dude turned to Gerald and added, "But you're

gonna have to control your drinking. Can't have you drunk, and blabbering about it."

Nell darted unseen into a nearby shed, and peered through a crack. "Don't worry, Dude!" The tall man said, nudging Gerald. "Right, Bro?"

Bro? Nell's heart jerked. Bro? Ted, the brother who gave Gerald his alibi? The tall man Joan Gantt saw? Straining to hear more, she inched further into the building, moving closer to the group on the other side of the wall.

"Ted, you call me as soon as you two get to Sonora," Dude instructed. "When I get the insurance check, I'll meet you there." He lowered his voice, "Cool it, y'all, here comes Lynn."

The sound of Nell's heart pounding in her ears didn't cover the engine noise of the vehicle approaching. Hurrying through an opening at the opposite end of the shed, she hoped to make it to her car, to escape without a confrontation. She ran, but not before the maroon Ford 250 pickup pulling up to the roping pen crossed her range of vision. *That's the truck Joan saw at Suzanne's that night!*

She raced toward her car, hoping against all odds they would not see her. Her cell phone lay on the front seat, and Nell hurried toward it. Afraid to look back, she circled her car, crouching beside it on the far side catching her breath. Quietly opening the door, she grabbed her phone, just as the three men and Lynn surrounded her.

She did not know if they had seen her running from the shed. Perhaps they had not. Maybe they would think she had been waiting for them at her car, that she had not heard any of their conversation. She discreetly slipped the phone inside the pocket of her jacket, and looked squarely into Dude's face.

"What're you doing, Nell?" he asked, his eyes glinting oddly. "Just what in the devil do you think you're doing?"

"Well," Nell said, surprised at the calmness of her voice. "I've been thinking about buying a horse." She glanced at Lynn. "Thought your wife might give me some good advice."

"You really should have called," Lynn said. "What's she *really* doing here, Dude?" She moved quickly behind Nell, grabbing both her wrist and yanking them behind her back. The woman's coarse voice sounded as rough as her hands felt against Nell's wrists.

She attempted to pull free from the woman's grip, knowing now that her snooping had been discovered.

"Give her to me," the tall man said, moving closer

"Wait," Dude ordered, turning to Gerald. "See if her keys are in the car."

Lynn shoved her forward, both Nell's wrists still clasped in the vice-like grip. At the trailer, Lynn pushed her up the steps. Opening the door, she threw her headlong into the front room. Nell fell against something, jamming her shoulder. Her cell phone knocked softly against the floor, and she prayed the other woman had not noticed. She also prayed the phone would not ring. It could provide her only escape from these people. *I should have listened to Don, how could I have been so stupid?*

Outside she heard her car engine starting. They were moving her car. She heard it easing around to the rear of the house, and made an effort to pull herself from the floor. Lynn slammed her clenched fist into the side of Nell's face, knocking her head against the floor. Grabbing her arms again, Lynn began wildly taping them with black electrical tape as if Nell's wrists were calf legs in a roping contest.

"What is wrong with you?" Nell screamed at the savage woman grunting and squatting over her. Helplessness washed over Nell as the futility of her predicament threatened to overpower her. In a surge of desperation, she kicked, and her foot made good solid contact with one of Lynn's massive breasts. The woman sprawled backward, her head catching the sharp corner of the kitchen counter as she collapsed to the floor.

Upright immediately, staring down at the motionless heap, Nell tore frantically with her teeth at the black tape binding her wrists as the pounding on the back door shook the trailer. "Lynn? Open up!" Dude yelled.

Nell punched the sheriff's number into her cell phone, her hand shaking so badly she had to redial. "I need help!" she told the dispatcher. "Send help to the Ben Garrett Farm, tell Don—"

"You dumb bitch!" Dude yelled, crashing through the locked metal door. Enraged, he pushed Nell aside, and proceeded to kick viciously at his wife's still unconscious body. "You dumb-ass bitch!" He repeated jabbed his ridiculously small boot into her.

Nell slipped the phone back into her pocket, and eased toward the front door, just as the other two men grabbed her from each side. Struggling against them, she stumbled over Lynn's legs. They lost their balance in the crowded space, and Nell broke free.

She yanked open the front door, and bounded down the steps, running head on into an elderly man on his way to the trailer, rifle ready.

"What's going on here?" the grayed haired old cowboy barked. "Get out here, all of you!" He jerked his head toward Nell. "Where's my granddaughter?"

"Inside," Nell responded.

"Get out here, you sorry outfits!" Ben Garrett directed the three trailing Nell with the barrel of his gun.

"Send an ambulance to Ben Garrett's farm," Nell told the 911 operator, "and law enforcement—"

"On the ground, all three of you!" Turning to Nell, he asked, "You know how to shoot this thing?"

She took the rifle, as the old man started up the steps toward his grand daughter. "Hold it, Ben," Nell said, "No offense, but you need to stay outside."

Ben cocked one bushy eyebrow, staring at her quizzically. Obviously confused, the old man moved away from the door, just as they heard Nell's car leaving, throwing dirt and rocks behind it. Nell's rifle pinned her prisoners to the ground.

When a deafening barrage of sirens and engines roared onto the property, Nell allowed herself to relax a little. She watched as the sheriff, escorted by city

police officers and state patrolmen, blocked Lynn's escape. The panic-stricken woman bolted from the car, only to be tackled, cuffed, and finally restrained.

Nell wondered what role Lynn had played in Suzanne's death. Recalling the way Dude had shushed the others when Lynn arrived earlier, Nell suspected the pitiful woman knew nothing. Nell decided the poor desperate thing had attacked her out of jealousy, thinking she wanted her man. Nell had to chuckle.

When the lawmen surrounded the prisoners on the ground, Nell returned the rifle to old Ben. Moving closer to Dude, she could not resist kicking his foot with the tip of her shoe. "Suzanne said it's so true, Dude." She emphasized his name in a mocking way. "About what they say about the size of a man's foot and his—

She paused, sliding her eyes up and down Dude's prostrate body, her gaze lingering on his groin area, causing him to squirm in the dirt. Slowly, she eased her attention up his body, riveting his frightened eyes with her own diamond-studded stare, pinning his head to the ground with the look. With a dry, hollow laugh, she jabbed his boot again, harder. "Oh, Dude, what a teenie, weenie little ol' *foot you have!*"