

Probably Murder by Michael F. Flynn

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It was a dark and stormy night; and, sure, I know how that sounds; but so it was. Himself watched the door with no little favor, for such nights may be blessing or curse to the Irish Pub. Those who were out in it would seek to get in out of it (and perhaps warm their insides a little), but those already indoors would hesitate to go out for the wee drop.

This seemed a night for staying in. The stools around the oval bar held beside myself only Danny Mulrooney who snored on a stool nearby, to the displeasure of the cash register. For myself, I could hoist Guinness with the best of them, but it was not in me to compensate for all those absent. Beside, I was awaiting only The O'Neill, who had tickets to the game. A basketball game at the University might be called many things, but "on account of rain" is not among them. It was no fit night for man nor beast, as the poet once said; but roundball fans fall somewhere in between.

When the door did fly open, however, it was Sam Hourani who came in, and a bit o' the weather with him. "Something dry," he told Himself, shaking the rain from his overcoat and hanging it in the corner. "A martini, but just let it peek at the vermouth."

"What brings you by, Sam," Himself asked, "on a night like this?"

"Business," said Sam, studying the drink placed before him from several angles.

Now, Sam's business was detective of homicide, so the announcement startled us some and we looked about for a possible corpse, considering, then rejecting, Danny.

The detective lifted his drink; but, though his expression had promised a swift end to it, he only sipped a little before replacing it. "I know a man," he announced, "who probably committed murder."

"Ah," said Himself, "but you're not certain. No *corpus delecti*?"

"Oh, there's corpus enough, poor woman, and it's her husband that did it."

"Did he now? Ah, those are the cruelest sort. How did he do it?"

"She fell down the cellar steps and broke her neck."

"And he pushed her!" I said.

Sam shook his head. "He wasn't in the house at the time."

"What'd he do, then, grease the steps?"

"No, I said he *probably* committed murder. He was a statistician. So, he insisted she do the laundry and the laundry was in the basement."

Himself crossed his arms. "This will make sense some day, I'm thinking."

"Death by falls is the second greatest cause of death. The probability is..." Sam pulled a notebook from his breast pocket. "...is 56.4908 deaths per million per year." He looked up. "That's an aggregate figure, of course. For each trip up or down, it's even smaller. But every time he made her do it, it was one more opportunity for a fall."

"But," protested Himself, "that hardly makes the poor felly a killer!"

"Not by itself. But he also insisted that *he* drive the car, which meant that *she* always sat in the right front seat, where the risk is greater. No passenger-side air bag, either. He took her swimming every week, though he never went in himself, and death by drowning is 14.9236 per million. He insisted she bathe, not shower. That's 1.2439. He encouraged her to smoke. *He'd* broken the habit, but he told her it made her look sexy and discouraged her sporadic efforts to quit."

The lights blinked and a clap of thunder shook the windows, causing us all to flinch. Even Danny stirred and almost raised his head from the counter top. Detective Hourani smiled a little. "He would have found some excuse to send her on an errand tonight. Death in cataclysmic storms is 0.3506 and lightning is 0.2375 per million."

"Well," I said, "that may be abusive behavior, but how can you say he *murdered* her?"

Sam sipped a little more from his martini. "I told you. He's a statistician; works as an insurance actuary, and he knew every single one of those risks, medical and casualty. Kept them in a notebook at home, which is where I got these..." He waved his notebook. "It works this way, you see..." He flipped a page. "The survival rate is one minus the risk. To find the chance of surviving *all* the risks, you multiply the survival rates."

"So if there are two things that can kill you," Himself wondered aloud, "say, 10% of the time; then the chance of surviving both is point-nine times point-nine, or 81%."

Sam nodded. "That's it."

“So, then,” said Himself. “This felly—”

“—exposed his wife to as many risk factors as he could, every day. Sure thing, she’d probably survive *any one* of them; but she’d probably not survive *all* of them. That’d be 0.9999435092 times 0.9999850764 times 0.9999996494 and on and on. *Multiple* trips up and down the stairs with a laundry basket; multiple trips in the car; two or three packs a day of cigarettes ... Chances of long-term survival dropped exponentially. Oh, the guy killed her, all right. He was patient. He worked the numbers. He saw me reading his notebook and he smirked at me, the damned bastard. That’s when I knew. That smirk. He couldn’t just be clever. He had to know that I knew how clever he was.”

Himself glowered at the wickedness of men. “D’ye think you’ll ever get him?”

Sam drank the rest of his martini and placed the glass on the bar. He smiled coldly.

“Probably.”

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