

“Twins” by Eric Wright

His wife had often criticized his plots for being too complicated, but this one worked.

“I want to get it right,” he said. “After making the mistake in the last book about how long it takes to get from Toronto to Detroit, I want this one to be watertight. So just go along with me until I’m sure that it’ll work.”

They were standing on the edge of an old mine shaft about ten miles north of Sudbury. The shaft had been sunk in the thirties and they had had to claw their way through dense scrub pine to reach it, and pick the locks on two chain link fences that guarded the hole. At least it was too late in the year for mosquitoes. She wondered how he had found this place.

He seemed to hear what was in her mind. “I found it two years ago,” he said. “I came up here hunting with Art. Someone told us we might find a bear along at the garbage dump but we missed the road and came to this place.”

He was a writer of detective stories. As far as he could, he liked to “walk the course” of his plots until he was sure they would work. She always went along as a primary test that the story was possible. The stories often took them to some pleasant places, so it was like getting a second holiday, but this time she had come because she needed to know what was in his mind. Sudbury in October is not a popular vacation spot. “Tell me again,” she said. “How does he get her to come this far? I wouldn’t.”

“You just did,” he pointed out.

“That was research. Unless you make your villain a writer, you’re going to have trouble. What is he, by the way?”

“I haven’t decided yet. It’s not important. I want to make sure this works, then I can flesh it out.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t work if the reader can’t believe she would stumble through a quarter mile of bush in this godforsaken landscape. You’ve got to find a good reason.”

“I’ll find one. Let’s get the plot straight, shall we?”

“This isn’t the way you usually work. Usually you get the characters first, then let the plot grow out of them. So you say, anyway.”

“Yeah, but this plot is ingenious. I mean, the villain thinks it is, so I want to test it before I spend my time creating his world. Okay?”

“Okay, so now he kills her. Right? And drops the body down there.” She kicked a small rock over the edge of the hole and listened hard, but there was no “ploomp” or rattle of the sound of the rock reaching the bottom. It must go down hundreds of metres.

“That’s right. He throws the gun in after her; he’s made sure it’s untraceable. Then he drives south to the motel in Parry Sound where they have a reservation. When he gets there it’s dark.” He looked at the sky turning pink in the west. “He registers as her.”

“Where did you get this idea?”

“From us. People are always saying we look alike, as if we’re a couple of gerbils.”

"Where does he change his clothes?"

"In the car, on a side road, probably the Pickerel River road, somewhere quiet. He doesn't actually have to change much: just put on a blonde wig, lipstick, glasses." He looked down at himself to show what he meant. Both of them were dressed in sneakers, blue jeans, and heavy bush jackets that came well below the waist. "Then he checks in at the motel, as her, 'her' husband is turning the car around or picking up beer or something. The point is the motel people have never seen 'her' and believe that he is there, too. An hour later, he goes to the motel office, as himself, to ask for a wakeup call, so now the motel people have seen 'her' and him. Then, around midnight, the fighting starts. The people in the units on either side hear a hell of a row going on, sounds of someone being smacked around, and it goes on so long they complain at the front desk, and the night clerk phones over and asks them to pipe down."

"The row is on tape, right?"

"Right. Then early in the morning the row starts again and there's a lot of door-banging and the neighbours see 'her' leaving, walking away. At breakfast time, he checks out leaving a message in case his wife returns. He tells the clerk she walked out on him during the night. She's probably gone to another motel. His message is that he's not going to wait around; he's gone home."

"So he left the motel in the blond wig, then came back quietly as himself a bit later. Wasn't he taking a chance?"

"Not really. If anyone saw him, he could always say he had tried to follow his wife, but she disappeared. And that's that. He goes home and when his wife doesn't appear that day he reports it to the police. But in circumstances like these it looks likely that the wife has simply gone off somewhere. It's a few weeks before he can get the police seriously interested."

"And when they do take it seriously, do they find her?" There was not much light left now. In the east the sky was almost black.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. A few weeks is as good as six months."

"They'll suspect him. After the row."

"But they won't be able to prove anything. When he leaves the motel after breakfast, he checks in with the Ontario Provincial Police in Parry Sound, in case 'she' had checked in with them, and he does the same thing all the way down to Toronto, establishing a solid time trail with no gaps for him to drive back up to Sudbury. Then it's easy to make sure he's covered for the next week in Toronto."

"It might work," she said. "Have you figured out how you are going to solve it? How Porter will, I mean." Gib Porter was the writer's hero.

"Not yet."

"You could start with a hunch. You could find out what time he left Sudbury and why it took him five hours to get to Parry Sound. Did anyone see his car parked along the highway, stuff like that?"

"Why would anyone be suspicious?"

She pondered. "Her father. He never liked the man she married, never trusted him, so he hires Gib Porter." Now it was close to dark. "What about the car? Someone might have seen their car parked along the highway."

"It's rented. Perfectly ordinary rented car. If anyone sees it they won't

memorize the licence plate. They'll just assume that it's a couple of hunters. But I haven't seen anyone around, have you?"

"No, I haven't. Who would be wandering around this moonscape?" She had to admit that he seemed to have everything covered. "One last thing," she asked.

"Why? What's the reason?"

"Motive you mean?" He shrugged. "Another woman, I guess."

"Come on. This is 1990. That was a motive back when you had to wait seven years for a divorce. People change around all the time now."

"Not if she refused. The other lady I mean. This guy has fallen in love with someone who refuses to see him unless he is free. She was raised in the Brethren. She loves him, but she believes in the sanctity of marriage."

"Does she indeed. It isn't his wife's fault, then." She turned her back on him and walked towards the road. She needed to know one more thing. "In the meantime, old buddy-boy," she said over her shoulder, "we'd better be getting back."

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a little handgun he had bought in Detroit. "Don't turn round Lucy," he said. She turned and saw that her last question was answered. It wasn't a game. She said, "It isn't going to work."

"It'll work, all right. It's going to work." He pulled the trigger once, twice, three times.

Everything else went smoothly. His wife had often criticized his plots for being too complicated, but this one worked. Two hours later the night clerk at the Sturgeon Motel in Parry Sound signed in Mrs. Harry Coates, a blonde lady with sunglasses (though it was quite dark), while her husband unloaded the car. During the night the clerk had to call them twice to ask them to pipe down because they were fighting and arguing so loudly that the guests on either side had called to complain. The rowing ended in the early morning with a lot of door-crashing, then Mrs. Coates came to the desk to check out. She still had her sunglasses on, but now the clerk thought they were probably covering up a black eye. Her husband, she said, had left her, taken a train or bus back to Toronto, maybe even hitchhiked -- she didn't know or care. She left a message for him in case he called. He never did, though.

She drove home and waited for two days for him to return, then she called the police. They made some routine enquiries, but they weren't very interested. The story of the night in the motel was clear, and the guy was almost certainly putting a scare into her by taking off for as long as his money held out, but pretty soon he would use a charge card or something like that, then they would be able to reel him in. They did establish he had a girlfriend tucked away in a condominium on Sherbourne Street, and they kept an eye on her place but she was as mystified as they were and he certainly never showed up. Nor did he try to call her. A month later the police assumed foul play and sent out a serious enquiry, and she began the process of establishing her legal position if he should have disappeared for good. When the first snow fell she knew they wouldn't find him until spring at the earliest, and then what would they find? A body, with no money in the wallet, and the gun that had killed him. (She had thrown *his* gun, from which she had removed the ammunition the night before they started their trip, when she realized what he was planning, into the French River on her way to Parry Sound.) And what would they

conclude? That he had been picked up hitchhiking, robbed and killed and dumped into the mineshaft by a local thug. There was still the very slight risk that someone had seen them when they went into the bush that evening, but it was a chance *he* was prepared to take, so it was pretty small. Since the chance of finding the body in the first place was about ten thousand to one, the further remote chance that someone saw them near the mineshaft was an acceptable risk. All she had to do was nurse her grief for the few weeks while the police make their enquiries.

The plan had been perfect, or pretty good. If she had not long known about the lady in the condominium, and if she had not come across his fishing tackle box with the loaded gun, the wig, and the make-up kit, packed ready to go, while she was searching for a pair of pliers, she would never have wondered what he was up to. After that it was just a matter of getting hold of a gun herself, and giving him every chance to prove her guess was wrong. The rest went exactly as planned.