

## BOB SHERRIN / from *Go Lightly*

The insurance agent sat at an oval inlaid table. In front of him, a rectangular box covered in red leather. He'd arrived at apartment 14 more than 20 minutes earlier and spent that time going room to room, noting everything again, particularly the many mirrors and of course the numbers. Here there everywhere. All sizes, many fonts. He'd come at last, as he knew he should and would, to the sitting room, to a creaky wooden chair, this table originally used for playing cards, and what now lay in front of him.

Naturally, he'd heard of such boxes, supposedly delivered by hand to ministers of the crown at the end of the day. Certainly in the 1940s and probably the 50s too. Perhaps proposed legislation or an eyes-only committee report, ambiguous comments and question marks pencilled in the margins. Initialled by previous readers as it made its way up the line. Maybe a decrypted signal from the monitored frequencies of a foreign embassy, a few days old yet secret enough.

The insurance agent ran a fingertip over the box lid, through an etched coat of arms, the letters *E* and *U* below it. Few flakes of gilt remained. He knew which government the symbol represented, even which part of it the *E* and the *U* stood for. Yet he knew only some of what such etchings could represent. One was Vera Lightbody.

Some time ago, the agent had stopped at the door to apartment 14 and rapped sharply three times. He hitched up his shoulders then dropped them. Ran his tongue over his teeth, cracked his knuckles, slipped a hand into a trouser pocket. The door opened.

A tall, elderly woman. "Yes?"

"Miss Lightbody?"

"I am. And you?"

"Vardo. Ed Vardo." He produced a slim card case from his trousers, a trick he'd taught himself. She took a card.

Edmund T Vardo  
Senior Domestic Agent  
Furnishings/Rarities  
PacSino InterNat

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“Not a great year for it,” Vera noted and handed the card back to Vardo.

He was surprised she didn’t want to keep it.

“Cheer up,” Vera said as she swung the door wide. “I’ve been waiting decades to meet Ed Vardo.”

“Oh? Really?” Was this flattery, error, dementia? “I’ve just come from the Severards.”

Vera ushered him in. “Oh yes, I’ve heard from Nel.”

Which one, Vardo wondered as Vera closed the door behind him. He followed her through a spacious living room.

“About the Swamp Angel?” Vardo asked, eyes automatically grazing. Chesterfield—likely Higgins & Crowe, early 50s, one of their hand builds. Floors, quarter-grain red oak. On it, a handsome Gabbeh, worth several thou. Vera directed him to a pair of wingbacks, angled 45 degrees to each other, relatives of the chesterfield. She sat him down.

“Yes indeed, Mr Vardo. About the Swamp Angel.”

“Call me Ed, Miss Lightbody. If you don’t mind.”

“Ed it is. Now, Mr Vardo: tea, coffee, Lagavulin, or cranberry juice?”

Vardo was tempted by the single malt. “Juice is good.”

Vera went to the kitchen. Vardo grazed on. Built-in bookcases, Garry oak by the looks of them, finely dovetailed. Lots of books, mostly hardcover and leather, some first editions no doubt, perhaps a few keepers. Not his turf, really. Brass table lamps, late 40s, doing fine but a bitch to polish. Might as well invest in silver. Below a large mirror a beautiful Arts and Craft table. A centred yellow bowl and behind it, propped against the wall, metal numbers. Serif font, maybe three inches tall. House numbers. But why 53561? Nowhere in Vancouver would you find such a number on a house. Not in Burnaby either, or New West. And never here in the West End. Vardo swivelled beyond the wing of his chair and picked out another sitting area near the windows. Leaded glass doors that opened onto the third floor balcony with a view along Beach Avenue. West Van to the right, Point Grey to the left. On one window ledge the numbers 90110, on another in green plastic, 44474.

“Here you are, Mr Vardo.”

Vera sat and raised her tumbler of Lagavulin. Vardo was quick to the challenge and raised his cranberry/mango. They clinked.

Thus it began.

Vardo now unclasped the hinged lid of the box and opened it. He was surprised by its depth and that its contents seemed all to be packaged or sealed in envelopes—layers of things overlapping one another. Particulars deposited over time? Casually archeological or placed in the box in hasty departure? Vardo smiled. They were in sequence but not sequential. One of Vera's fundamental points.

Vardo stood, doffed his jacket, uncinched his tie, pulled out his shirt tails, and sat back down. A series of movements that he could logically describe as 1 2 3 4, 5. But Vera saw each act as separate, complete in itself. The sequence 2 4 3 1 5 is just as logical. Each part of it still makes sense. String them together as you wish.

Vardo retrieved an item. A white envelope, sealed, unmarked. He tapped one end sharply on the table then tore the envelope open.

A letter, handwritten, dated three days before Vera's death.

Dear Edmund,

You know and don't know why you are here. I should apologize for interrupting your beloved routine, but I won't. By opening this letter you probably realize that you've begun to manipulate the contents of the box I pilfered decades ago. It's worth a few dollars, I imagine, at a yard sale, but you'll know more precisely than I.

When you first came to see me, and on every occasion since, you wanted to see the Swamp Angel, but you didn't want to hear about the book of the same name. I won't disturb you with all of it, just a few of my essentials. "You must have the whole of thing to really pin it down," you say. I've always thought of the essentials as a crib for a code, a clear point of entry. Once you're in you may do whatever you want to decrypt the damned thing, the problem being that once you are inside you may find no easy exit. So, you ceaselessly, often pointlessly, decrypt then interpret then guess.

Right now, my essentials are the red box and what I put in it. The box I stole in 1944 from the house on Laurier Street where, as you know poor boy, the Examination Unit was ensconced. You may do with my essentials what you

wish. Catalogue them, appraise them, impose sense on them, keep some, leave others behind. Since I have no heirs, I've informed my executor Nel Severard to show you into my home one last time. I encourage you to stay as long as you wish and take whatever you wish from it when you leave. However, once out the door, it locks shut behind you. After that, everything is in Nel's hands.

Edmund, you should also know that the occupant of my apartment before I acquired it was Ethel Wilson.

Yours sincerely,

Vera

Vardo set the letter down, smoothed out its creases. He thought of Vera's claim. She'd discovered he liked syllogisms. He did want things to unfold logically, efficiently, unsurprisingly—as possible. If a syllogism fails, refine it. Make it more precise. Vardo loved a syllogism's chimeric simplicity. In a syllogism, sequence is one thing acting on another, leading to a sound conclusion if done correctly.

"What about death?" Vera reminded him. "Your faith. You are a middling Christian of some kind, yes? Insists that new life begins after death. Conclusion: a sequence."

Vardo patted the table. Lubrication. He took Vera's letter, walked half round the table, and set the page down. He continued his circuit.

Everything, he believed, has a place. In fact, Vardo had a theory about it. Thing Place Theory declares Thing and Place inseparable. Because the place of a thing—anything, even a person—tells you something about its value. Imagine that an inlaid oval card table of cherry, yew, and walnut falls from a vacating tenant's pickup and settles to the side of the alley behind Vera's building. Its value lies at a particular place on the spectrum known as Pre-owned Distressed. Eventually, a good agent will situate it accurately on that spectrum. On the other hand, an identical table in apartment 14 of Kensington Place is inseparable from the attentions of its own environment. Mainly humidity, dust or grit, the quality of polish used on it and the frequency of its application.

Vardo fingered the edge of Vera's table. Certainly in the sub spectrum Collectible/Pre-antique. Just as light naturally shifts through a blue-red range, Vera's table, if maintained in its place for several more years, would just as naturally move well into

the second half of the spectrum. Should it end up ignored in a humid, dusty closet of the Severards' apartment for a decade and a half? An unfortunate, different Place for that Thing, thus an unfortunate, different value. Sequence or sequential?

Vardo patted his gut. He always preferred dilemma over predicament. The former permits a choice between only two options, while the latter may offer too many to choose from. Vardo poked his gut. What was his dilemma?

Carry on or pack up and leave.

Leaving at any point, however, poses the predicament of choosing what to carry off. Vardo unbuttoned his collar and looked.

He'd first sat with Vera over there. She to his left, he to her right. Sinister and dexter. He thought *sinister* illusive, allusive, thus more irritating and attractive to him than *dexter*, the norm, the mundane. Sinister demands action—by proxy. Dexter offers good hand-eye coordination. Gently equivalent to juggling several dossiers at once, settling claims with speed and minimum outlay. Keeping the regional manager at bay.

The wingbacks were hand-built, as Vardo initially surmised when he professionally thrust his rump back and down. Superb cushioning, embracing but firm, no creak to betray machine screws, no yaw from sloppy dovetails or decayed adhesives. Sad to say, he'd been wrong about their provenance. Not Higgins & Crowe in Victoria. Durrieux et Fils, Provence du Quebec. Had he paid closer attention to the chairs' piping, Vardo now reminded himself, he'd quickly have recognized its intricate pentagonal braid, sign of Norman upholstery craft for centuries, a tradition maintained by the best furniture makers in Quebec till well after the Quiet Revolution.

After she'd handed him his drink, Vera sat down in her own wingback. They air clinked, Vera steadily tipped her Lagavulin, and Vardo declared how hard it was to sip cranberry juice.

"It's the container," Vera pointed out.

Vardo the adjuster inspected it. Vertically faceted, French made, a piece of Duramark. Virtually worthless even when new. "A tumbler," he said with certainty.

"Indeed, Mr Vardo. Note the word *tumble* that forms 6/7ths of it. The glass is designed to fit the fist and be tipped over your teeth, tumbling its contents into your open gullet. You know already how well it works."

"*Tumble*," he said, "also *to fall*."

"How many falls can you name?"

“Niagara, Shannon, Bridal Veil, Victoria—prat.”

Vera nodded approval.

“Head over heels,” he added.

“As in *into love* or *out of love*?”

From the start, Vardo saw Vera as a bit of a marm—as in *school*, as in *battle-axe*, as in *attracted to domination*.

“Your silence,” she said, “tells me you have fallen both ways but not recently.”

Vardo scrutinized the last of his juice. He’d regularly appraised the losses in vandalized homes, felt the rage in shattered dinnerware, mirrors, prized objects. Some was the work of home invaders. Many were the responses of either party to a bitter divorce. Vardo tossed back the last of his cran/mango and felt an idiot. He himself had just fallen, as in *for it*.

Vera took the tumbler from his hand. “I have a quick mouth, a well-aged imagination, and too few visitors,” she said. “A vile combination. Please excuse me, Mr Vardo.” She was on her feet, heading off to the kitchen.

Vardo sank into a wing and contemplated the starched slope of his shirt, broken only by the yellow dots and dashes on his deep-blue tie. Marj’s gift, the dots and dashes repetitively forming her name in Morse code.

Something tapped his closed fist, and Vardo automatically opened it to accept the tumbler Vera placed in it.

She sat. “I’ve perked it up a little. I do hope you approve, Mr Vardo.”

He was getting his stats in order: Edmund Vardo, Senior Domestic Agent, also an internationally qualified adjuster when required, second in rank and seniority to the West Coast Regional Mananger. Priceless, according to his mother. As we all are, Vardo thought, until we’re compost. Only then can our true worth be accurately fixed.

Vera raised her refreshed glass of Scotch. “You can’t approve until you taste it, Mr Vardo.”

He sipped and nodded. “Russian vodka.”

“Polish. Potato.”

“I am doubly blessed.”

They sipped quietly. Vardo began juggling two questions completely tangential to his business with Vera. Ask them, man, get them out of the way then get back on track. Now.

"Why the numbers, Vera? And what is it about such words as *tumbler* and *fall*?"

"Code."

"Pardon me?"

"Code. Cryptography, ciphers, encryption systems, Mr Vardo. The numbers in this room, as you've obviously noticed, are in groups of five. A form of machine code used by most participants in World War II. Still used now, still generated by machines but exceptionally swift ones. Not the sort of computers you find in London Drugs. Ah, those hand-built NI jobbies demanded by intelligence heads. Desperately purchased by their higher ups. Hideously overpriced, but they crank out *nearly* unbreakable codes."

"What's the attraction?"

Vardo guessed. Lonely old woman, thus the daily crossword, then cryptic word scrambles, finally graduation to Sudoku. A way to fend off the effects of deceased friends, declining memory, the stupid complexity of remotes.

Vera eyed him. "I've always liked the seemingly unlimited combinations they provide. I've always been attracted to patterns of any kind, and there are lots of them in machine codes. In any code, actually. Even the one on your tie. Any language, in fact, human or otherwise."

Vardo shifted uneasily. "Words?"

"They're code too. A good dictionary..."

"Is the key?"

Vera marmed. "Do you speak German, Mr Vardo?"

"No. But I could translate some. I could decode some of it."

"Individual words, yes. Phrases, perhaps. Complete sentences, hardly ever. But you couldn't decode the Zimmerman Telegramme or the latest transmission from the German consulate in Vancouver. For that you'd need to *understand* the grammar of the language. Not simply know its vocabulary."

"You're a codebreaker, Vera?"

"Used to be. Strong emphasis on the *used* part of *to be*."

Vardo was well off-track, and he knew it.

"Like marriage, Mr Vardo, *to be* and *used*. Those words can be shaped into statements of fact and bitterness. As most of us know, though few of us consider them codes worth breaking."

Vardo nodded. "Or even see them as code."



"Dear me, everything is code, though I can't say any longer what parts are worth breaking."

Vardo surrendered to the detour. "So, you were really a codebreaker?"

"For a time, yes sir. But I did more than that. Deep background, codes of a completely different order."

"Where?"

Vera motioned for his near empty glass. Vardo handed it over. She stood.

"Ottawa, at first."

"When?"

"1941 to 1945. And since." She wiggled his glass. "The same again, Mr Vardo? Something else perhaps?"

"Less juice, if you don't mind."

"Wise choice."

Vardo's eye caught the end table by the chesterfield. Rosewood, legs with Welsh spindling, maybe a Rhys. Closer investigation might lead to a complete decrypting of its value. If the legs were hand turned, add 65% to the original assessment. If the initials ABR were carved into the table's underside, add another 175%. Toss in another 80-95% if Alun Barrie Rhys had bothered to date his work, particularly that done in the heavily rationed 40s. Vardo imagined himself on his back between the table's legs peering upward with a flashlight. Vera interrupted him with a tumbler of pale pink liquid.

Vardo tasted it, nodded approval, and ceased being a PSIN agent. Aka *pissin agent* or *Pa*. "For whom?" he asked,

"For us," she eventually said.

"Who's us?"

"Well, that's a complex pronoun in your particular usage. Part of it is covered by the Official Secrets Act. Which, of course, the Brits tendered like a high quality sleep medication and we Canadians quaffed it back. Part of it sleeps under the UKUSA Agreement. The Brits and Yanks concocted it after the war. Slipped it across the table to such select Commonwealth countries as Canada and Australia. A nice rich dessert. We gobbled it up chop-chop and begged for more. Which wasn't long in coming. Soon enough, we were servants again."

"Meaning?"



"Meaning, Mr V, that we did the scum work of breaking code while the Brits and Yanks kept to themselves the intelligence derived from it."

"But, if you break a code, you can read it, you know what it says, you have the intelligence."

"Need-know. You break part of a code. You break out bits of messages from a variety of sources, never the whole of anything. The Aussies do the same. The Yanks and often the Brits assemble it. Make so-called sense of it. Say to us, 'Thank you very much. Now piss off.'"

Vardo mulled. "So, limited distribution, eyes only sort of thing. Top secret."

"Cosmic is the term still used in Ottawa for this sort of thing."

"So you can't tell me."

"Of course I can. I'm 87 years old. Do you really think they might abduct me on my way to Joe Fortes Library, execute me in a secluded part of Stanley Park? As a warning to others?"

Vardo shrugged.

"You dabble in things actuarial, Mr V. Consider oaths, for example. Absolutely central to marriage, yet look at the divorce rate."

Vardo dodged that one by looking at his watch. "Jesus shit." He had another appointment. In 43 minutes somewhere in southeast Shaughnessy—granddada's hand-painted decoys. Or was it 18th century Italian amber rosaries? Vardo set down his tumbler with the distinctive thump of a senior domestic agent getting down to business. "The Swamp Angel," he said.

"Which one, Mr Vardo?"

"There's more than one?"

"I know of at least three."

Vardo thought of his car parked four blocks away on Beach Avenue, of running amber lights and courtesy stops. So he shifted to standard issue mode: semi-transparent tact and politeness. He touched Vera lightly on the forearm. "I'd love to hear about them, Miss Lightbody," he purred, "but I do have another appointment. In ten minutes, in fact."

Vardo decrypted Vera's gaze: you and your greasy smile.

Vardo popped to his feet and extended a hand. "Consequently, we must talk more."

Vera made to stand herself but faltered and settled back in her chair. Vardo dropped his untouched hand, mumbled about finding his own way. They'd most certainly speak again. Very soon.

He made his way across the living room to the small vestibule. He opened the door.

"I will *not* talk to you on the phone," Vera yelled as Vardo closed it behind himself.

In the hallway, Vardo leaned forward, palms on knees. He took several deep breaths, let go of the last one as he stared into the burgundy carpet. Old moldy wine, retro theatre curtains, Marj's steaks, over ripe plums.