

D. Foy

an excerpt of

The Burden

Frances sat on the davenport, her face in her hands. Right or wrong, now, her notions of the way things were, the whole of her very reality, had with a single ruthless blow been lopped away, like a head from a guillotined body. There were no more accounts to reckon, no more explanations to contrive. Until someone came—she hoped it would be Ted—there was nothing she could do but watch the old woman rock in her chair shabby with holes and stains, muttering, not so much indifferent to the gravity of her deed as deeply oblivious. If only Frances could remain calm for the next few hours, the fabled curtain would rise and all would be revealed. It had to be, somehow. It must.

“I suppose you thought the ants would carry him away,” she said. “Or perhaps you were going to donate him to science.”

“I’m stuck on number twenty-three across,” said the old woman. “It’s six letters for something about *luau fare*. Ha. Just where I’ve always wanted to go. A luau. Standing around with a bunch of tattooed polyplebeians cooking pigs and things.” She tapped her teeth with the pencil she seemed never to be without, then frowned. “Might as well go ask Sam Hill the answer.”

“Yes, Mother. And while you’re at it, ask Sam Hill how he thinks we’re going to get out of this mess.”

“Trains,” the old woman said, her eyes fixed on the puzzle. “That’s the only way I’ll ever travel. Everyone who’s anyone knows I’ve paid my fare.”

Frances turned her gaze to the dead man. Had it not been for the dime-sized hole in the back of his head he might have been caught in the throes of some ravenous passion. There he sat, hunched like an operatic phantom, as if that were the only pose suitable for wrenching music from an antique pump organ. The man’s fingers were splayed along the keys on the last of his chords, the keys still depressed. His feet, too, were as they should have been, square

on the pedals embossed with needlework apple blossoms, one cocked up, the other down. The man looked as if he were playing, she thought. He *had* been playing, and yet, she reminded herself, now he was not. Now he was not doing anything. He was dead. *Deader than a mackerel*, as Ted would say.