

Robert B. Parker's Framed

ONE

I said to Susan Silverman, "I need you to explain Taylor Swift to me."

"We don't have enough time," she said, smiling at me like a sunrise over the water.

"It can't possibly be that complicated," I said.

"Only for people who needed grief counselors when Ella Fitzgerald passed," Susan said.

We were having dinner at Woods Hill Pier 4 in the Seaport. It was a new farm-to-table restaurant and this was our first time here. I had already noticed several "grass-fed" items on the menu. Susan had tried to explain the difference between beef cattle eating grass and forage and not grain. I finally told her that if she loved me as much as she professed to, she'd stop.

But I then informed her that I was going for the grass-fed short ribs as my main course just to show her I was a team player, and constantly open to new things.

"Name one," she said.

She sipped some Sancerre, though sip was a generous description of how little wine had been displaced in her glass when she placed it back down on the table. I was drinking Caymus. It

was both a delicious and expensive cabernet to which I treated myself on occasion. This was one of those occasions. But I had reminded Susan after I'd ordered it that I was bucks-up after an especially profitable summer professionally.

Susan had politely asked – and not for the first time -- to stop using “bucks-up,” as she said it made me sound older than the Great Barrier Reef.

“Now back to Taylor Swift,” she said.

“Yahoo,” I said.

“Do you really want an explanation about her music, and crazy popularity,” Susan said, “or is this a way for you to lead me on a musical merry chase back to Ella, and Sarah and Billie and all those other bad girls on your playlist?”

“Merry chase?” I said. “And I’m the one with dated references?”

“Watch it, buster,” she said. “This is a date night, remember.”

“See there,” I said. “Refocusing the conversation is why they pay you the big bucks.” I grinned. “Up or otherwise.”

She smiled again.

“For one thing,” Susan said, “Taylor is as good as a businesswoman at branding and constantly finding new ways to connect to her audience as she is at singing and songwriting.”

“So the lyrics are more than about getting even with old boyfriends?” I said.

“You know more about her than you’re letting on,” Susan said.

“Got me out of Wyoming,” I said.

She was dressed in black tonight. A chic black dress that looked as if it had been made only for her, one that nearly matched the color of her hair. Single strand of pearls. We had just come back from a warm November weekend at the Harbor View Hotel in Edgartown, and Susan

had gotten enough sun that her skin might have been just a tiny shade darker than usual, even after she'd used a kind of sun block that should have carried an SPF number somewhere around one thousand. As always, she looked beautiful enough to make angels sing.

I said, "Unless your own playlist is a cruel deception, you genuinely like her music."

"Love," Susan said. "Her voice as much as her lyrics. Want to hear some?"

"Maybe later, if I've inspired you to burst into song," I said.

"Dream on, big boy," she said.

She took another sip of wine. At the rate she was going, she might finish her glass by Veterans Day.

"But I thought it was only young women and those young at heart who were Swifties?" I said.

"Watch it," she said.

"Not true?"

"Even a grass-fed hunk of beef like yourself could be a fan if you really were open to new things," Susan said. "She tells stories about love and heartbreak and empowerment and self-acceptance, and you'll need to get back to me if those are themes that only women can understand. And, on top of all that, she fell in love with a football player."

She raised her glass.

"And what could be more American than that?" Susan said.

We clinked glasses and drank.

"What brought this on, by the way?" she said. "Are you really trying to be discerning about modern culture, or just obstreperous?"

"Look at you with your big words," I said.

“There’s more where those came from,” Susan said.

The restaurant was very crowded tonight. I knew our appetizers were back in the kitchen somewhere, but I was in no rush. I was with Susan. As always, time stood still. I was pretty sure it was Auden who had written, “Stop all clocks.”

“I just got to thinking that her and Travis Kelce might be the closest the world has gotten to Joe and Marilyn since Joe and Marilyn,” I said.

“Only married for nine months,” Susan said. “But a love story people still talk about.”

She winked and then smiled one more time, this one from downtown.

“They met when Travis Kelce tried to give her a friendship bracelet with his number on it,” Susan said. “His number was 87, by the way.”

“Now you’re making me hot,” I said.

“What else is new?” she said.

It was when our appetizers finally were delivered that Susan looked across at me, her face suddenly serious.

“Are we done not talking about Martin Quirk?” she said.

TWO

It had been just over a month since Quirk – the most honored and respected cop in the history of the Boston Police Department who had risen to the title of Superintendent-in-Chief – had seen his life and his career turn into fireworks over the Charles on the 4th of July.

It had all happened, fast and furious, in the place I would still called Filene's window if I wasn't afraid of Susan saying that was another expression as old as the earth.

It was because of a woman young enough to be Quirk's daughter – or maybe even granddaughter – who had come forward to tell a story of an inappropriate sexual relationship with Quirk in her role as one of his criminal informants. She said Quirk had used her, both as a CI and as his mistress, before not just cutting her loose, but putting her life in jeopardy with an unnamed drug cartel Quirk was trying to bring down.

I didn't believe a word of it, other than the part about her having been an informant. I frankly would have believed that Quirk, more Catholic than Pope Leo, had a side hustle as a drag queen going before buying into the story the woman had told at her press conference in early October.

But the woman, Gabriella Flores, had not just come forward with what she said was undeniable proof of the relationship, she had come forward with a high-powered and high-octane

Boston lawyer – and noted female empowerer herself – named Gale Singer. Singer was known far and wide as someone who could make Gloria Allred look like a wallflower in comparison. She wasn't as famous or as formidable in Boston's legal community as Rita Fiore, at least not according to Rita. But if she came after you -- and she had come hard after Martin Quirk -- you needed to be wearing a helmet.

The press conference had been held across from police headquarters at Schroeder Plaza. By the time it was over, Singer had already built a website that basically called Quirk everything except a groomer with a badge. The website – and Gabriella Flores – accused Quirk of not just paying her but putting her up in an apartment in South Boston, as well. But then, she said, Quirk had abandoned her for not providing the information that he had expected from her in his efforts to stop the flow of drugs – primarily fentanyl -- flowing into Boston at even more alarming rates than ever before.

She didn't say the name of the man I knew Quirk was after on her big day. No one who knew what was good for them ever did in public, not from law enforcement nor from the media, and not unless they wanted to spend the rest of their born days tied up in defamation lawsuits from now until the Second Coming.

But I knew Quirk was after Luis Romero because he'd told me all about him over drinks one night a few weeks before the press conference.

"You know who he really is, right?" Quirk said that night at the Street Bar at The Newbury. "And what he really does?"

"I know what I hear," I said. "And none of it is good."

"Well in this case," Quirk said, "you don't know what you don't know."

"Do tell," I said.

He did, across what turned into a long night, laying it out for me as if laying out the facts in a deposition. At one point he gave me a long look and said, “I’m only telling you all this in case something happens to me.”

I realized he wasn’t kidding, Quirk never having been much of a kidder.

“Come on,” I said. “A lot of bad guys have come after you. After both of us. And yet here we are.”

“Romero might be the worst guy,” he said.

Luis Romero: Who had been artfully hiding behind one of the most lucrative courier systems on the East Coast – known as Velocidad -- almost since his arrival in the United States twenty years earlier. Hiding in plain sight, really, while Quirk said he had been bringing drugs into the country by the boatloads. And, as luck would have it, his boats weren’t ever the ones getting blown out of the water.

Romero was rich as Abu Dhabi, that much I did know. What I didn’t, but found out that night, was that he really was as litigious as a federal government that hadn’t come close to bringing him or his real operation into the light. His lawyers seized on any hint that he might be involved in drug trafficking. One whistleblower -- and only one that anybody knew about -- had reached out to the Globe a few years ago. But the day before the scheduled interview with the reporter, according to Quirk, he’d been found dead in his apartment in Brighton. OD. Mix of cocaine and fentanyl. Labeled a suicide.

“My Irish ass that poor bastard offed himself,” Quirk said.

According to Quirk there were so many layers – in addition to lawyers – to Romero’s operation that linking him directly to the drugs that were coming in was in Quirk’s words like trying to eat soup with a screwdriver.

“But I had to try,” Quirk said.

“You were going to be the one to take him down,” I said.

“Bet your Irish ass,” Quirk said.

Romero, he said, had been born in Venezuela but later moved to Mexico, where he had – allegedly, of course – become an up-and-comer in the Gulf Cartel. Now, though, it was as if he were his own Bank of Boston.

“Because of coke and fentanyl,” Quirk said, “not providing next-day delivery with his goddamn courier service.”

Both the feds, and the BPD, had been trying to bust Romero and bust his operation for years without making any headway, and while keeping their mouths very much shut about that. Romero was that good and now, according to Martin Quirk, the most dangerous and powerful crime boss in Boston, even while continuing to pass himself off as a pillar of the community. And Quirk had become obsessed with trying to find out how he was getting away with it.

At least and until Gabriella Flores was ready for her closeup. I had watched every minute of it from the moment Maria Stephanos had cut into afternoon programming to air the press conference on Channel 5.

“This young woman,” Gale Singer said that day, “trusted that Superintendent-in-Chief Quirk would protect her from the drug traffickers with whom he had become obsessed.”

“Which drug traffickers?” a reporter had asked.

“All of them,” Gale Singer had said tersely. “Let’s leave it there.”

“But it was all a lie,” Gabriella Flores interjected tearfully. “And as a result of that lie, I am now forced to disappear, if I can, as if *I* am the criminal.”

“And just know that if anything happens to Ms. Flores,” Gale Singer said, staring so hard into the cameras you were afraid they might self-combust, “her blood will be on the hands of the sainted Martin Quirk, who left her hanging out to dry like laundry on a line.”

Additionally, Singer had handed out financial records for Flores, about her rent, about the bank account she said Quirk had set up for her. Photographs of her and Quirk. Emails linked to Quirk’s BPD address. It had been a lot. And a great, big hot mess.

After all the bad guys Quirk had put away in his career – occasionally with help from Hawk and me – now he was the bad guy, being publicly shamed by Gale Singer and by her client. Not just shamed in front of Quirk’s God and the world, but ruthlessly prosecuted by a woman who had spent her own career as a criminal defense attorney.

“Gail might be a bitch on wheels,” Rita told me over drinks a week or so later, “but I have to tell you, she’s usually on the right side of things, even if she would crawl across broken glass to get to the nearest television camera.”

“She’s on the wrong side of this,” I said, “whether Quirk is our friend or not.”

“I know you don’t want to hear this anymore than I want to say it,” Rita said, “but the evidence looks bad for Martin.”

“So what would you do if you were defending him, even in the court of public opinion?” I said. “Shame the victim if that’s what it took?”

“All day long,” Rita said. “And sisterhood could kiss my very shapely ass.”

“This is a frame,” I said, “if an elaborate one.” I paused and said, “All day long.”

But whether it was or not and whether common sense should have told the world that Martin Quirk wasn’t capable of anything like this, he was put on what they were calling administrative leave the next day, pending a departmental review of Flores’s charges against

him. His boss, Police Commissioner Edward Mackin, made the announcement himself at a press conference of his own. Mackin said that it was the most difficult decision – and most painful one – he’d had to make since having been appointed to his position by the mayor.

“But the investigation will be handled by this department without fear or favor,” Mackin said. “We will go wherever the facts of this case, and not simply allegations, take us. In the end, this isn’t just about Martin Quirk’s integrity being called into question. It is about the integrity of the Boston Police Department.”

I had been reaching out to Quirk ever since, sometimes more than once a day, without getting a response. Rita had done the same. So had Frank Belson. Even Hawk, whose relationship with Martin Quirk had always been more complicated than the tax code, had tried to find him. And failed.

Quirk had disappeared.

Same as Gabriella Flores had, as promised.