

Phillip A. Laplante

plaplante@psu.edu

### **Crepehanger**

*June 13, 1943, 1:15 AM, Hoboken NJ, alleyway behind 4<sup>th</sup> and Washington Streets*

A slim, dark-haired woman clad in a black, tight-fitting sweater and pants moved with cat-like grace through the night in the alley behind Handelmann's Bakery. She reached for her lockpick pouch in her back pocket, selected two slender metal rods, then, in a few seconds, delicately picked the back door lock. She repocketed the pouch and withdrew a small flashlight— not the kind you can buy in the 5 and dime store — from a different pant pocket, turned the doorknob and entered the room. Flicking the flashlight on, she swept the room with a narrow beam. She saw it was a storage area, haphazardly stocked with bags of sugar, flour, various trays, baking racks and other trade ware. She saw a desk with a shortwave radio transmitter and receiver and what appeared to be a gun safe.

In another corner she saw a filing cabinet and moved quietly to it. It was locked, but she picked it open in a few seconds. She opened the top drawer and thumbed through some manilla folders, She found one of interest, withdrew a small camera, about the size of a cigarette pack from another pocket, and carefully began removing papers from the folder, placing each on a small table next to the cabinet. She took a picture of each page, moving a slide on the camera between shots.

A dim hallway light flicked on, backlighting the silhouette of a large man standing in the hallway, pointing a pistol at her.

“You vill put your hants upp!”

It was too dark to see the man’s face, and she realized he probably could not see hers clearly since she had smeared it with soot. She raised her hands. The man advanced slowly toward her.

“You vill turn around, so you do not see me, yah?”

With hesitation, she complied. He moved towards her cautiously, until the muzzle of the pistol in his right hand touched her back.

“Now, I think vee take you someplace vere vee can find out who you are and vhat you are up to, yah?”

Suddenly, in a well-practiced maneuver, she spun 180 degrees counter-clockwise, smashing the man hard in the face with her right forearm, simultaneously, her left arm cleared his gun from her back then trapped his gun hand as she curled her bicep. She then delivered a knife hand strike to the base of his neck with her right hand, then a palm strike, pushing his head downward. She immediately delivered a right knee to his face, then another, then another, then one final, massive knee strike. The man dropped the gun as he collapsed to the floor, his face, an unrecognizable bloody pulp. She reached down and felt a carotid artery for a pulse. There was none.

She returned to the file cabinet and put everything back in place. She glided across the room quietly out the back door, stopping only to take a small black crepe flower from a pocket and place it on the dead man’s corpse.

\*\*\*

*August 12, 1973, Wayne, NJ*

To a 11-year-old, fatherless boy, like me, nothing could be more boring than a summer evening alone with a 50-year-old, dour, spinster aunt. My mother and two sisters ( one older, one younger) were visiting the family across the street, so we were alone.

Aunt Anna had lived with us since I was born. She moved in, ostensibly, to help my mother with her young children, but the real reason was to escape an oppressive existence with her widowed, overbearing father, my grandfather.

We lived in a nice middle-class neighborhood in North Jersey. My hometown, Wayne, was a bedroom suburb of New York City. My aunt dutifully took a bus every workday to her menial office job in Manhattan. She used to take that bus with my father, who also worked in Manhattan. But he had died suddenly about a year ago, and now she made the roundtrip each day alone. I was surprised that she never seemed to worry about walking the many blocks from her office to the bus station alone, especially since she was a scaredy-cat. Night noises, car backfires, glass braking all made her “petrified” and quick to head for the nearest place of hiding. And it was easy for her to hide because she was rather plain.

She was of average height and weight, had brown and grey speckled short hair. Her skin was pallid and mottled with freckles and moles, but she hid most of these with simple, long-sleeved blouses, and slacks – even in the summer. She rarely wore hats and never wore heels – her feet always bothered her. You could lose her in a crowd very easily. But I knew from the family photo albums that she had once been slim and pretty.

I loved my aunt, but she was not much of a conversationalist. We had few common interests to talk about anyway. She was very sedentary, had never travelled, and had few leisure pursuits, so she had no interesting stories to tell. She didn't even have a driver's license. She never went on dates, and as far as I knew, never had a boyfriend. So, no juicy gossip there. Her main interests in life were a little reading (of boring, homemaker type books) and gardening, some cooking, and a lot of sewing, knitting, and crocheting. In fact, she had once been a seamstress. But that was long ago, and not a subject that I was interested in anyway.

No, my aunt was not fun at all. She also found the bad in everything. Every glass was half empty, every cloudy day was a washout. Every happy event had some downside. In fact, my mother called her the "crepehanger" because she was such a defeatist. This name was a reference to the old practice of hanging black crepe in a household to mourn the death of a loved one. Nobody used this term except my mother.

Aunt Anna and I had one peculiar form of bonding, though. For some reason she loved watching James Bond movies, as did I. I don't know why she was fascinated with these movies – she was disinterested in any other form of action, adventure or fantasy film. Perhaps she was captivated by Bond movies because the romance, action, and adventure represented everything her life was not. I know for sure, though, that she found the Bond actors, particularly Sean Connery, very attractive – she once told me so.

On this evening, we were sitting in the family room on opposing lounge chairs, watching the second Bond film, *From Russia With Love*, released in 1963. The plot involved Bond trying to

steal a Russian Lektor cryptographic device from their Istanbul embassy. This film focused much more on story, the exotic setting, and visceral action than it did on gadgets, globe spanning travel and campy humor, like most of the other Bond movies. It really didn't matter, though, as we usually sat and watched the Bond movies in silence.

We had seen this movie before, but on this night she had one too many crème de menthes after dinner and was a bit talkative. So, I thought I would take advantage of this rare opportunity to learn something about her past – perhaps she once did something interesting. During the first commercial break, I asked her:

“Aunt Anna, what did you do during the war, I mean, the second world war?”

She closed her eyes deep in thought.

\*\*\*

*January 5, 1943, 9:15 AM, 80 Lafayette Street, Manhattan NY, Offices and Manufacturing Facility of Baker & Company, Office of Mr. Michael M. Murphy*

Michael Maxwell Murphy was a 50ish executive with a commanding demeanor. He was intimidating – 6 foot 2, 250 broad shoulders, a bit of a belly, but very sturdily built He had blond, greying hair. He was humorless and all business. He was “Mr. Murphy” to most people he worked with, except for his superior – no one knew who this was – and a few trusted

subordinates, who called him “M.” At this moment he was wearing a blue 3-piece suit and sitting at his oversized, mahogany desk studying some papers when a single, soft knock came from the open door.

Murphy raised his head and gestured to a chair in front of his desk. A young woman in her early 20s with a lithe build, dark hair, and pretty face. She was wearing grey overalls and canvas shoes. She sat in the chair, looking confident but a bit confused.

“Close the door and sit down.”

She complied silently.

I guess you are wondering why I called you to my office “Miss Santangelo?”

“No. I hope I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“As a matter of fact, you did some things very right. Your floor supervisor has noticed that you work faster and more accurately than anyone else and with little supervision. He guesses that because you were a seamstress before the war you have higher than usual vision and ability for fine manipulation. But more importantly, you have a good attitude. You pay attention, follow directions to the letter, keep to yourself, and don’t gossip like most of the other girls. We also did a deep background check on you, and it came back clean as a whistle – not even an overdue library book. And then there is this...”

Murphy waived a piece of paper.

“The results came back from your aptitude test that you took when you applied for the job, and you received the highest score of any of the girls that they ever tested in the last two years. “

“That’s nice. Does this mean I am getting a raise?”

“No, it means you are being recruited to join the FBI.”

“What, really, what?”

“Do you want to serve your country?”

“Yes, of course, but what can I do?”

“Well let me tell you. What I am about to tell you is classified, so mum’s the word. You think your job is making fine wire for vacuum tubes, right? – Wrong, you are making fine wires for the target reticle of the Norden Bombsight – the most accurate, sophisticated bombsight in the world. We make the prototypes for the latest versions here and, boy, would the Nazis like to get their hands on one. My job is to keep this device out of their hands, and I want you to help me.

“Wow. You want me to be a spy to help fight Nazis”

“Yes. Can I count on you?”

“Yes, Mr. Murphy, you can count on me. When do I start?”

First, I am going to send you to Virginia for a few weeks for training. When you get back, I will give you your first assignment. Tell your family, friends, everyone, only that your employer is sending you to a remote assembly plant to help with the war effort and that you will be incommunicado for a few weeks. Tell them nothing more.”

“OK, Mr, Murphy.”

\*\*\*

*August 12, 1973, Wayne, NJ*

Aunt Anna finally opened her eyes from what seemed like a short nap, but it was probably only 30 seconds:

“I had a menial job.”

“Where?”

“New York City.”

“What did you do?”

“I worked in a wire factory. My job was to pull a wire through a series of metal dies. Each die had a slightly smaller diameter, and the result was a fine wire used in vacuum tubes. It was boring but the tubes were very important for the war effort.”

“Oh, that does sound boring.”

That seemed quite fitting – a boring job for my boring aunt. I didn't need to know any more about wires.

The commercial ended and the scene where Bond meets the beautiful Russian defector, Tatiana Romanova was on screen. My aunt's eyes widened as she stared at the TV and locked on Bond. I broke her trance with another question.

“Aunt Anna, did you ever have a boyfriend?”

She closed her eyes again and was lost in thought.

\*\*\*

*January 12, 1943, 8:15 AM, 80 Lafayette Street, Manhattan NY, Offices and Manufacturing Facility of Baker & Company, Office of Mr. Michael M. Murph*

M was seated at his desk. The door was open. An attractive young woman stood at the door, about to knock. She was wearing a flattering black suit dress with a lacy blouse, black high heels, and petite coordinated hat.

“Come in Agent Santangelo, welcome back. How did your training go?”

“Fine. I liked the high-speed driving course and the hand-to-hand combat taught by Colonel Fairbairn.”

“Yes, I heard that he thought you were a quick study and one of the best female agents that he’d ever trained.”

There was another knock on the open door, and a strapping, handsome, confident, 30 something gentleman in a grey suit and fedora stood at the door. He had an uncanny resemblance to the actor Sean Connery at the same age.

“Come in Grant, I want you to meet your new partner. Agent Grant meet Agent Santangelo. We recruited her from the wire lab. She’s just back from training and was at the top of her class.”

“Nice to meet you Agent Santangelo, you can call me Donald. I like smart, pretty women. I think we are going to get along swell.”

He may have noticed that Santangelo blushed.

“Nice to meet you too Agent Grant, ah, Donald.”

“Santangelo, you will be working under Grant.”

A wry smile crossed Grant’s face.

“Grant close the door.”

Grant closed the door and moved next to M’s desk and sat down next to Agent Santangelo.

“First things first, Agent Santangelo now that you are onboard you need a codename. Since you were a seamstress, you have dark hair, and you tend to dress in dark clothing, your code name is Crepehanger.”

“Crepehanger? Gee, I am not sure if I like that. Couldn’t you come up with anything more positive?”

“Sorry, it’s already been approved.”

Grant laughed and gave her a little black crepe flower that he had been hiding in his pocket.

“Welcome to the team, crepehanger. This is for you.”

She blushed..

“How did you know what my codename was going to be? And what’s your codename”

“I came up with it after I read your file, then I suggested it to M. And my codename is Romeo.”

She blushed again. Murphy interrupted their flirtation.

“Enough with the banter. I want to discuss your first assignment together.

Now look, we have good reason to believe that there is a Nazi spy ring operating out of Handelmann’s Bakery in Hoboken, and we think that they are after the bombsight. We can’t just crash in there – we need to know what they are up to, who their leader is, and we need to know how they are communicating with Berlin. Why don’t the two of you pay them a visit, tell them you are engaged and need a wedding cake. Sniff around, find out what you can, and what our next steps should be.”

“OK, M., will do. I am very much looking forward to planning a wedding and especially the honeymoon with Agent Santangelo, I mean Crepehanger.”

Santangelo gave Grant a disapproving look, followed by a thin smile.

\*\*\*

*August 1973, Wayne, NJ*

Aunt Anna opened her eyes again from her deep meditation.

“I had a boyfriend for a little while during the war.”

I could see she wasn't in the mood to say more, so I stopped my interrogation – for the moment – and we resumed watching the movie.

Soon, we were watching the scene where Bond visits the Romani camp to get information about an assassination attempt on him. During his visit, the enemy Bulgar tribe invades the camp, and a wild fight ensues. Bond helps repel the attack and saves the life of the Romani chief. As a reward the chief lets Bond spend the night with two beautiful woman.

Aunt Anna was mesmerized by this scene, and when there was another commercial break, and I sensed her guard was down, I seized on the opportunity to extract more information.

“You had a boyfriend? Really? Tell me more.”

Aunt Anna closed her eyes again.

\*\*\*

*January 12, 1943, Handelmann's Bakery, 4<sup>th</sup> and Washington Streets, Hoboken, NJ.*

It was just after 11 AM, and the morning bakery crowd had long dispersed. The bakery as empty except for a 40-something man standing behind the counter and a hulking, younger man

moving around the store. The older man was slim, average height, with a mop of brown hair and a waxed handlebar mustache. He also had a prominent mole, like a large raisin on his right cheek. The younger man was probably in his late 20s and was at least 6 foot 2 and 250 pounds. He had short blond hair and a face like a pig with a large, upturned nose, no chin, and bristle whiskers. He was also in a baker's smock and was now stocking a display case with bread and rolls.

As the door opened and the agents entered, the older man greeted them in heavy German accent,

“Hello, may I help you?”

Agent Santangelo was scanning the bakery as Grant spoke.

“Yes, this lovely lady and I are going to be married in a couple of weeks, and we want to order a wedding cake.”

“Yah, I can do that. Vhat kind of cake do you Vant?”

“Not so fast. Before we hire you and leave a deposit, I need to know a bit more about who I am dealing with. First, are you the owner?”

“Yah, I am Otto Handelmann, this is my bakery.”

“How long have you been in business here?”

“4 Years. I opened up in 1939, when I came to this country. I have baked hundreds of wedding cakes. I can give you references”

“German references? Are you active in the German community here in Hoboken?”

“Yah, I have some German friends here. Americans too. They can vouch for my baking.”

“Are any of your friends Nazi sympathizers?”

“What does this have to do with a wedding cake?”

As Santangelo pretended to look at baked goods she noticed that the hulking baker had paused stocking the display case and appeared annoyed as he stared at Grant. She noticed the bulge of a gun in his waistband behind his back, and he began to slowly move his hand towards the gun. Meanwhile Grant kept prodding Handelsmann.

“I just like to know who I am dealing with, especially if I am going to spend a lot of money on a wedding cake. And I don't do business with Nazi sympathizers.”

“You ask too many questions.”

“Donald dear, I am getting so hungry. Let’s get some lunch and talk about the kind of cake we want and then we can come back and discuss it with Mr. Handelmann.”

The hulking young baker stopped moving his hand. Meanwhile, Grant understood that it was time to go.

“OK, darling, we’ll get some lunch and talk about the cake. I am open to anything you want. As long as it doesn’t have raisins in it. See you later, Handelmann.”

They exited quickly and closed the door behind them and walked down the street arm and arm.

“Why did you rush me out like that? I was trying to goad Handelmann into letting his guard down and giving us some information.”

“That Nazi was reaching for a gun, and this was no time for a shootout. I heard more shuffling around in the back room too. We were outnumbered. They are up to something, but we need to find out more and obviously the direct approach isn’t going to work. What do you say if I come back tonight, alone, after the bakery is closed, and pay a little visit and see what I can find.”

“Why alone?”

“Because I can move more quietly than you, ya big lug, and besides two people moving around a back alley will draw more attention than one.”

“OK, you convinced me. But first, we’ll need some lunch, and you will need some rest for your evening visit. It just so happens my apartment is about 15 minutes away in Weehawken. Let’s go there and I’ll make you a nice lunch, and then you can use my bed.”

“Your bed? To rest up, right?”

“That, and to discuss our honeymoon.”

“Oh, Donald!”

\*\*\*

*August 1973, Wayne, NJ*

My aunt opened her eyes.

“There isn’t much to tell.”

The television was playing the scene where Bond triggers a gas bomb at the Russian embassy, then, as confusion ensues, he enters wearing a gas mask. He finds and steals the Lektor and manages to escape the building.

Aunt Anna was distracted again, and her defenses were down.

“But, what happened to your boyfriend?”

She was entranced by the movie and did not immediately respond. I am not sure she even heard me.

\*\*\*

*June 14, 1943, 80 Lafayette Street, Manhattan NY, Offices and Manufacturing Facility of Baker & Company*

The next morning Agents Grant and Santangelo were standing in front of M’s desk, debriefing on the events of the previous day. The agents discussed their initial visit to the bakery, Handelmann’s demeanor, the young baker’s menacing posture, and their retreat. They omitted any details of the intervening hours at Grant’s apartment. Then Agent Santangelo gave her report on her nighttime return to the bakery. M interrupted.

“I understand you ran into some trouble inside with some night watchman?”

“That assistant baker who we saw stocking the shelves yesterday gave me some trouble, but not too much. Colonel Fairbairn taught me well. I took care of him. You can count one more Nazi out.”

Grant chuckled.

“Chalk off one Nazi spy. You certainly earned your codename Crepehanger.”

M nodded slightly in agreement.

“That was a job well done, Crepehanger. The photos you got are proof that they are after the bombsight. There were drawings and schematics of the device and more concerning, a floor plan of this building. They are obviously preparing to steal it somehow. We have to find out how they got these, how they plan to steal it, and we need to increase our security measures here.”

Suddenly, there was a loud explosion, then a second.”

Grant ran to open the door – the hallway was full of smoke, alarms were sounding, and people were scrambling. The overhead fire suppression system began spraying water. Through the open-door M’s office started filling with smoke. Grant shouted

“We’re under attack!”

M barked orders,

“They’re after the bombsights. We need to get to the secure storage room and protect them. Grant, Santangelo get there fast, I need to call in reinforcements.”

Grant and Santangelo raced out of M’s office and had to dodge their way through the frenzied crowd of people and smoke, navigating the hallways and down two stair levels up to the secure room where the various Norden prototype models were stored. Their progress was frustratingly slow through the smoke and massed rush of people.

When they arrived at the hallway just outside of the secure storage room, they could see that the two outside, uniformed guards were down and either dead or unconscious, and that the steel door had been blown open with some sort of explosives. They drew their standard issue, colt-snub nosed detective specials; Grant from a shoulder holster, Santangelo from her purse and advanced cautiously. As they approached the door, two figures in dark overalls emerged wearing gas masks. One was holding a pistol the other pushing a dolly that appeared to hold one of the Norden bombsights. The lead figure began firing at the agents, who had to duck into an adjoining hallway to avoid being hit. When they peaked back towards the secure room a grenade rolled down the corridor. Santangelo yelled.

“Duck!”

They dove further down the hallway. The grenade detonated but it was not a fragmentation one – it emitted smoke. Choking through the smoke they ducked back into the hallway and cautiously moved towards the secure room. But the thieves had disappeared down the other hallway. Over the din of the alarm bells, Grant shouted:

“Damn it, there probably heading for a getaway car, most likely it’s parked on Lafayette Street, maybe we’ll get lucky and catch them.”

They raced down two flights to the Lafayette Street exit. as they exited the building they saw two men getting into a blue 1940 Mercedes Benz Cabriolet – not an everyday commuter car. Santangelo though she recognized Handelmann by his mode and mustache getting in the passenger seat. She did not recognize the driver.

“There they are.”

They were lucky and Grant’s government issued car, a black, 1942 Chevrolet Master Deluxe sedan, .was parked less than 50 yards away. They ran for the car – Santangelo, who had ditched her heels in the building – was running barefoot.

You better drive Crepehanger, I may need to shoot, and you’re the better driver – anyway, that’s what your fitness report said. They got in the car, Santangelo in the driver’s seat, and the inline 6-cylinder engine roared as they began their pursuit. But they were several cars behind.

The Nazi Mercedes sped north on Lafayette then turned toward Canal Street with the Chevrolet closing fast. Santangelo wove between two cars, knocking over a pushcart – sending melons and other fruit bouncing through the sidewalk and street, as the vendor who narrowly avoided being hit, shook his fist at them and shouted something in Italian. They started seeing signs indicating the entrance to the Holland Tunnel was ahead, as Grant shouted over the roar of the engine

“I think they are heading back to Hoboken, they must have a fast boat waiting for them or they could hop a train hop of at any stop, and maybe even an airfield in 30 minutes. Or they could get on Route 3 and hide out in any of the 100 small towns within a half hour drive. We have to get them on the other side of the tunnel.”

They drew closer to Holland Tunnel entrance, and they saw the Mercedes crash through the toll gate and entered tube number 1. Then the passenger in the Mercedes leaned out of the window and started shooting at them. Grant opened his passenger side window, leaned out and returned fire. Then he shouted:

“Don’t get too close. We can’t have this gunfire inside the tube with all these other cars. You’ll have to try to sideswipe them when they get to the New Jersey side.”

Santangelo nodded, as she entered tube number 1.

Ahead, the Mercedes continued through the tube number 1 of the tunnel, weaving around cars between the two lanes, until the light at the other end became visible. The passenger in the Mercedes had stopped shooting, believing that he had driven off the pursuers.

But as the Mercedes exited the tunnel onto the old Paterson Plank Road, Santangelo gunned the Chevrolet's engine and closed the distance to the Mercedes. She pulled up next to the Mercedes, sending a truck marked "Tom Thompson: Eggs" in the opposite lane careening off the road. Crates flew off the truck and scattered eggs all over the road.

Santangelo guided the Chevrolet into a maneuver that side-swiped the Mercedes and sent it spinning down the road, full circle twice and for 100 yards, before hitting a fire hydrant that stopped it. Broken auto glass and metal trim pieces were spewed around the wreck. Water gushed from the damaged hydrant; the Mercedes jammed against it and disabled. Crepehanger slammed the brakes on the Chevrolet, stopping 100 feet from wrecked Mercedes. As Grant and Santangelo exited their car, the driver got out of the front seat, opened the same side rear door, and grabbed the Norden bombsight, which was strapped to small dolly. He started running west, pushing the dolly. Handelmann exited the passenger side of the Mercedes, gun in hand, and began running east.

"Crepehanger get the driver. You can't run fast without shoes, but the bombsight will slow him down. I'll get Handelmann."

Grant dashed off east, gun drawn, in pursuit of Handelsmann. Santangelo started west after the driver and the Norden Bombsight. Barefoot, she ran through the broken glass and metal pieces from the Mercedes to keep after the driver and the Norden. Her feet, already bruised and raw from the barefoot dash at headquarters, were now cut badly as she chased the driver. In a few moments, she was bleeding and limping and realized she could never catch him. She drew her snub-nosed revolver and took aim at the driver, now at least 50 yards away, and fired six shots in rapid succession. At least one of these shots hit their target, as he dropped to the ground like sack of flour.

Crepehanger limped toward the motionless body cautiously, anticipating a trap. But as she closed in she saw that he was bleeding heavily from several wounds, including one to the back of the head. Checking his pulse, she confirmed he was dead. She whispered to the corpse.

“Your tough luck, Nazi, that I was also the top of my class in shooting.”

She reached in her pocket and dropped her signature black crepe flower on the corpse. Then she grabbed the handles of the dolly that held the bombsight and started limping back to the Chevrolet to look for Grant. She was beginning to feel lightheaded from the blood running from the many gashes in her feet. She also knew that she probably had broken several toes and sprained or fractured her ankles.

“Darn, I wonder if I will ever wear heels again.”

Painfully, she reached the Chevrolet and then passed where she last saw Grant chasing Handelman. Eventually, she came upon Grant lying motionless on the ground in a pool of blood. A wound from his head was gushing blood.

“Looks like you saved the day, Crepehanger. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to go on the honeymoon alone.”

And then he gasped his last breath.

“Oh, no, Donald!”

\*\*\*

*August 1973, Wayne, NJ*

Aunt Anna opened her eyes.

“He was killed serving his country.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

I thought I saw her eyes moisten. I never asked her about her boyfriend again.

We watched the rest of the movie in silence.

Here's how it ends. Bond escapes with the stolen Lektor on the Orient Express, pretending to be on a honeymoon with Romanova. A SPECTRE assassin posing as British Agent Nash is tracking them and eventually confronts Bond in an epic fight inside one of the sleeper cars. Bond kills Nash and manages to escape with Romanova and the Lektor, only to be caught by the Russians. Bond destroys the Lektor by throwing it off a cliff and is released. The film ends with the SPECTRE agent in charge, Rosa Klebb, trying one last time to kill Bond in a hotel room. Bond, with Romanova's help kills Klebb and they resume their "honeymoon."

Tidy endings to a thrilling story is a hallmark of the Bond movies, and this is one of the many reasons why I loved them. My aunt too – I think she liked the closure, especially when the bad guys got their due.

\*\*\*

*September 15, 1973, 9:30 AM, Preakness Shopping Center, Wayne, NJ*

My mother had parked the car in front of Witloff's Bakery, our favorite, only a short drive from home. Aunt Anna and I were waiting in the car while my mother and sisters were buying shoes at the store next to the bakery. Aunt Anna said her feet hurt and she wanted to wait in the car. I hated shoe stores, so I stayed with her.

Aunt Anna sat in the front passenger seat just looking around. I was in the back seat dozing on and off, wishing I was anywhere else. We sat in silence until she saw something inside the bakery that interested her.

“I think I see someone I know in the bakery. Stay here, I want to say “hello.”

This was unusual, because Aunt Anna was not gregarious. But I was sleepy and was happy to continue to daydream in the car.

She got out of the car and headed into the store. The bakery was busy with patrons milling around, a couple of girls behind the counter, and an elderly gentleman who I assumed was a baker stocking a display case.

My aunt walked in and approached the elderly gentleman. He was wearing a baker’s smock and was grey-haired with one of those old-fashioned handlebar mustaches. He had a mole on his face that was so large that I could see it from 50 feet away, through the storefront glass, and all the people moving around. The mole had to be at least the size of a raisin. Aunt Anna engaged the baker in conversation. Then, and I don’t know why, he led her the back of the store where I lost sight of them. I returned to my daydreaming, then dozed off for a few minutes.

I heard the door open, and Aunt Anna got back in the car. She held a box tied in baker’s twine and also a paper bag. I thought I saw a bit of flour on her pants.

Was that man the guy you thought he was?”

“No.”

She clearly didn't want to talk about it.

"Hey, what did you get from the bakery?"

"An Australian teacake and some raisin biscuits."

"Nice!"

These were two of my favorites.

"I wish your mother would hurry up, I'm anxious to get home."

"Me too, I want to dig into those goodies. Oh, here they come. Looks like they bought a lot of shoes."

My mother and sisters returned to the car. My mother took the driver's seat, started the car, and we began the trip home.

"Anna, what did you get at the bakery?"

"A dozen raisin biscuits and an Australian teacake. 11 bucks and change for that. It's highway robbery!"

“Don’t be such a crepehanger, they are the best bakery in town.”

We drove home amid chatter about shoes and accessories. I was glad to get back to my house as nearly an hour trapped in the car with my boring aunt had exhausted me. But I was looking forward to the goodies she bought – probably the most exciting thing she did all week. I told you my Aunt Anna Santangelo was boring.

\*\*\*

*Newark Star Ledger*, September 16, 1973.

Wayne police are investigating a murder that occurred sometime on Saturday morning at Witloff’s Bakery in the Preakness Shopping Center. Otto Handlmann, 78, of Kearny, NJ, a baker, was found stuffed in a flower sack in the storeroom. Police say he was strangled to death with a baker’s smock. They have few clues except that a black crepe flower had been stuffed into his mouth. No suspects have been identified. Anyone with information should contact the Wayne police department.