

# The Lovable Rogue

## THE ROGUE MEETS HIS MATCH

BY  
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To me she will always be *the woman*. I have met many women in my time but none like Irene Atom. She was not one of those prissy high society types who exist solely for expensive parties. No, Irene Atom was what could best be described as clever.

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It was an unusually balmy winter evening in San Francisco. The *glitterati* wore their fur coats out of fashion, not necessity. It was also opera season, that dangerous time of year when culture and sociality gang up on unsuspecting aspirants to the *beau monde*. I've been told that it takes a man at least six seasons to harden to the point where he can stomach the opera and still maintain enthusiasm for the post-opera party. Many do not have the mettle and they slide back into the bourgeoisie, fading forever from the gossip columns.



*"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."*

It was Friday night and I was at a post-opera party in the home of a flamboyant financier. I may at times miss the opera, but I never miss the party. Unfortunately, the prima donna was also attending the party. She was artificially demure, holding court among a group of fawning admirers. I hoped none of them would ask her to sing. It's not that I have anything against good music, it's just that there's something about sopranos. I think it's the remarkable similarity between their singing and the banshee of love-starved cats. I crossed my fingers and hoped for the best.

"Winston!" someone called.

I turned to face the voice. It was Sidney Felstein, dashingy dressed in a stiff tuxedo with a champagne glass attached to the left sleeve.

"Sidney, been to the opera, I see."

"Yes. Marvelous, simply marvelous."

The prima donna overheard our conversation and smiled.

"Don't encourage her," I muttered, pulling him aside. "So, Sidney, how have you been?"

"Fine, fine. And you?" He was nervous. Well, Sidney was always nervous. This time he was more nervous than usual.

"Fine," I said.

"Fine. Listen, Winston, I've got something to talk to you about." He spoke softly and looked around to see if anyone else was listening.

"Fire away," I said.

"As you probably know, I've always had political ambitions."

"Is that so?"



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"Yes," he nodded. "In fact, I'm going to run for governor next year."

"Congratulations!" I patted him on the back.

"Yes, I am quite pleased about that. But there is a dark cloud in the ointment."

"What?"

"You see, many years ago I committed a trifling indiscretion that I'm afraid might come back to haunt me. You know how the press treats electoral candidates. They rake them over the stove. They dig up all the smut they can find regardless of how old it is."

"Yes, I suppose one must have a clean past."

"No skeletons in the cabinet."

"Right." I was beginning to worry about old Sidney. Perhaps had imbibed a bit too much of the bubbly.

"Well, I have a skeleton that must be disposed of, if you know what I mean."

"What kind of skeleton?"

He looked around again and continued once he was convinced no one was eavesdropping.

"There are these photographs, Winston. You see, many years ago I was romantically involved with an entertainer. The photographs are of the two of us. No one must ever see them."

"Is it so bad to have been romantically involved with an entertainer?" I asked. "Sometimes a glamorous past is an asset."



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"When I say entertainer I don't mean an artist in the traditional sense. Not a musician nor an actor."

"What do you mean, Sidney?"

"I mean an entertainer on Broadway."

"Broadway? Not bad."

"In North Beach."

"Oh, that Broadway." In case you don't know, Broadway in San Francisco's North Beach is full of what can politely be called "strip joints".

"It was a clandestine relationship and these photographs could be very damaging to my campaign if they fall into the wrong hands."

"Are you being threatened? Is she blackmailing you?"

"No." He fidgeted. "I don't think this person even knows about my plans to run for governor."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I'm afraid of the uncertainty. I'm afraid I'll be blackmailed once my candidacy is announced."

"Oh," I said.

"What I need is a preemptive strike. You know, get the photos before the temptation arises."

"I see."

"Yes, well." Sidney poured the champagne into his mouth. Words momentarily escaped him.

"And you want me to obtain these photographs for you," I said.



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"Yes, Winston, that's the idea. What do you think? You can do that sort of thing, can't you?"

"What's her name?" I shrugged.

"Irene Atom."

"Irene Atom? I never heard of her. Where is she living?"

"Somewhere in North Beach."

"Can't you be more specific?"

"No, I can't. I haven't seen her for years. She retired over fifteen years ago."

"That's a long time, Sidney. Are you sure she's still around?"

"It's not that long." He shrugged and shivered at the same time. "People have long memories."

He was holding something back, but that's just how these political types are.

"I suppose you're right," I said.

"Then will you help me?" he asked.

Before I could answer, my worst fears came true. The prima donna began to sing.

"Well, Sidney, I've got to go."

"But will you help me?"

"You know me, Sidney. I'm always willing to do my part to expedite the political process."



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Sidney smiled. I hurried away from the party before the prima donna could inflict permanent damage to my nervous system. The only sure remedy for a soprano is the solitude of a Rolls Royce.

\* \* \*

"James, I believe the best way to locate Irene Atom is to ask a few of the North Beach old-timers."

"Indeed, sir?" He spoke in a manner that seemed to doubt my approach.

"Yes. There must be someone who knows her whereabouts. Don't you agree?"

"If you say so, sir." His manner was becoming a bit annoying. I have noticed that there are times when he can be a bit arrogant. Still, he is a good chauffeur. Worth the difficulty in finding.

I began my search for Irene Atom that evening. You've got to get up pretty late in the day if you want to find information in North Beach.

The streets glistened in the damp aftermath of a brief rain. The distinctive North Beach aromas had been temporarily suppressed by the sudden dousing and they now emerged from the pores of the city and rose like steam from a baked clam. The obvious thing to do was to hit all the old joints and find someone who still knew Irene. Not quite like looking for a needle in a haystack, but almost.

James took me to Enrico's, a slowly fading North Beach icon known for live jazz and lively ambience. I was hoping to find an old-timer named Eddie Muncher, a full-time hanger-on who knew more about North Beach than anybody. In the old days he had owned an obscure, tiny club called "The



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Green Apple". Only hard-core locals ever knew of it. Since then I had kept Eddie supplied with racing tips so he was always willing to do me a favor. And if anybody knew the whereabouts of Irene Atom it would be Eddie Muncher.

I settled myself at an outdoor table, ordered an espresso, and watched the crowds on their way to Finocchio's next door. In case you don't know, Finocchio's is a joint specializing in female impersonators. And it was amazing how many people went there. Mostly out-of-towners searching for a glimpse of the real San Francisco.

But my concern wasn't the real San Francisco, it was Sidney Felstein and Irene Atom. An unlikely sounding couple, I must say. I really didn't know Sidney all that well but it didn't surprise me that he would have gotten himself mixed up with a stripper. His taste in women was always a bit strange. Not quite gubernatorial material, if you ask me.

I was on my second espresso when Eddie finally wandered by. He wore a too-green plaid sport coat and a dark brown hat with a gray feather in the band. His nose had lost the battle to dominate his face but it had not yet given up the fight.

"How ya been, Winston?" he said.

"Good, Eddie. And you?"

"I'm still alive and kickin."

"Still play the horses?"

"Aye, whenever I've got spare change."

I smiled and slipped a list of horses and some spare change into his coat pocket. He winked and smiled.



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"Say, Eddie, I've got a question for you."

"Ask away, Winston."

"Have you ever heard of a stripper named Irene Atom?" I asked.

"Irene Atom," he pondered. "A stripper, you say?" His eyes squinted, forehead creased, and jaw tightened. When Eddie ponders, he ponders.

"Yes," I said.

"The name sounds familiar," he said. "She still performing?"

"No. She's an old-timer. Retired at least fifteen years ago I'm told. Thought you might have heard of her."

"My memory must be a-slippin, Winston. I don't know of no stripper named Irene Atom."

"Well, thanks for exercising your brain."

"You're welcome, Winston. I'm sorry I can't remember. I'll let you know if it comes back to me. Be seeing you." He saluted me with his index finger and shuffled off.

Have you ever noticed how interrogation makes one hungry? No, you probably haven't. Well, believe me it does. Questioning Eddie Muncher had made me extremely hungry so I followed the scent of garlic across the street to Little Joe's. There was nothing wrong with the food at Enrico's but I figured I'd be able to run into a few more old-timers at Little Joe's. And I was right. I sat down at the counter next to an old hawker named Skeets.

"Hello, Skeets."

He looked at me through bangs of dry yellow hair that was so much like straw a horse would have eaten it.



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"Why, hello Winston Churchill!" he said. "I haven't seen you in ages."

He held out a scruffy hand. I shook it carefully.

"How have you been?" I asked.

"Can't complain. I'm eating enough garlic to stay healthy."

"Good."

"Yes, sir. Garlic and olive oil will make you live forever."

I smiled. He may just be right.

"Say, I'm looking for someone", I said. "Maybe you can help."

"Sure. I'm always willing to help a pal." He slurped some spaghetti into his mouth. "Who are you looking for?"

"A stripper named Irene Atom. She retired about fifteen years ago."

"Irene Atom? A stripper?"

"Yes. I'm told she used to work in North Beach."

Skeets shook his head.

"You sure she didn't work at Finocchio's?" he laughed.

"She was a stripper," I repeated.

"Oh." He shook his head again. "No, I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Then keep eating your garlic."

Skeets smiled and saluted me with a fork full of spaghetti. "I'll let you know if something turns up," he said.

"I'd appreciate it."

"But I don't think anything will."

I ate a plate of first rate pasta carbonara and resumed my search. But it was no good. No one remembered a stripper named Irene Atom.



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"You've got to find her!" Sidney screamed. "She's got to be around somewhere!"

"Are you sure?" I said. "She may no longer be in San Francisco."

"She is, Winston, she is. I just know it."

It seemed to me that Sidney was a trifle paranoid. Perhaps it was the pressure of mounting a political campaign.

"I can't find anyone who remembers her," I added.

"Winston, you've got to find her! You've got to try again."

"All right, Sidney, I'll try," I sighed.

"Thank you." He relaxed slightly. "I'll reward you with a cabinet position if you find her."

"That won't be necessary," I said. The thought of serving in government chilled me to my bones. That was not by gig.

"Well, I'll find some way to reward you."

"Don't worry about it, Sidney."

He smiled, shook my hand, nodded and led me to the door.

"Good luck," he said.

\* \* \*

"James, any ideas on how to find Irene Atom?" It was a silly question as it turned out.

"Yes, sir, I do. In fact, I've been making a few inquiries on my own and I believe I have discovered her place of residence."



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"I say, good job!" Good chauffeur, that James. Do you know how hard, no you don't.

"She is living with someone in North Beach and no longer uses the name of Irene Atom."

"I suppose that was to be expected. Still, it's unusual that none of the old-timers had ever heard of her. But never mind. Take me to her, James."

"Yes, sir."

James prepared the Rolls and soon we were slicing through the streets of North Beach. He drove several blocks down Columbus then turned right onto an upwardly sloping street lined with multiple-floor apartment houses. Most of them were Victorians but several modern boxes had unfortunately been wedged in between the older structures. They looked like weeds growing between cracks in the sidewalk. As usual, parking was impossible. James temporarily double-parked the Rolls in front of one of the Victorians and let me out.

"She lives in Apartment 31," he said.

I nodded and approached the building. It used to be white but dirt and cracked paint had turned the facade dull tan. A man with long gray and black hair sat on the steps. He wasn't doing anything but staring. I approached the steps and he looked up.

"I'm looking for Irene Atom," I said.

His eyes were as hard as marbles. He shrugged.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

Again he shrugged. I don't think he lived anywhere. I left him to his private world and climbed the three steps to the front door. It was a nice door -



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dark wood with frosted glass etched with an art deco ethereal design. It could have used some refurbishing, though. I twisted the door knob and found the door unlocked. I eased it open and stepped in. The foyer had the musty smell that foyers get after a century of sweat, tobacco smoke, and leaky windows. The mailboxes were to the right of the doorway; the stairs in front of me. Someone opened a door on the next floor but I couldn't see who it was. I got the impression, however, that I was being watched.

I made the quick deduction that Apartment 31 was on the third floor and started up the stairs. They were noisy. I walked as softly as possible but I still sounded like a herd of thundering Buicks. I was right about Apartment 31 - it was on the third floor, halfway down the hall.

I paused at the door and heard shuffling inside. I displayed the quick thinking I am known for and decided it would be better to use a false identity and quickly thought of one.

I knocked on the door. A scruffy, middle-aged man opened it. His hair was very short and it stood straight up. Tiny stubbles of beard poked out of inappropriate parts of his face.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"I'd like to see Irene Atom."

"Who?"

"Irene Atom."

He looked at me funny. I thought that perhaps for once James had gotten it wrong.

"She used to be an entertainer," I said. "Does she still live here?"



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"Oh, Irene." His eyes became opaque. "What do you want to see her for?"

"I'm a journalist. I'd like to interview her." It seemed like a good story to me.

He looked at my custom-tailored, dark gray double-breasted suit and recently shined black Italian shoes. Ferragamo, of course.

"You look like a lawyer to me," he said.

"I say, there's no need to get nasty," I said. "I really am a journalist. From Cleveland."

"Journalist," the man mumbled. "How do I know you're a journalist?" People in this city are so suspicious.

"You'll have to trust me, I guess."

He looked me over again. I think he liked my shoes.

"Wait a minute." He closed the door and I heard some whispers and more shuffling. After a few minutes, he reopened the door. I should have known that James would not have gotten it wrong. Good chauffeur, that James.

"Come on in," he said.

"Thank you."

The apartment was drab with outlines on the walls where until recently pictures or posters had hung. Only one light was on, a dim table lamp balanced on a crooked end table next to a stuffed armchair. The woman sitting in the chair was smothered in shadows. She rose and stepped into the musty yellow light.



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"Hello, I'm Irene Atom," she said.

She was late middle-aged with sharp facial features and young blonde hair. She was attractive, not beautiful, and had the kind of face that you could stare at for hours but never fully understand.

"Hello, my name's Fred Miller," I said. It was the best name I could come up with at the time.

"You are?" She studied me the way a palm reader studies palms. It was a bit disconcerting. "Then I'm glad to meet you." Her handshake was powerful. "You've met Brian." She nodded toward the man.

"Hello," I said to him.

"Fred Miller," Brian mumbled. His expression was a mass of scrambled eggs.

"So, you're a journalist?" Irene said.

"Yes, I write for the *Cleveland Times*."

"Cleveland?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing in San Francisco?"

"I'm here to write about North Beach."

"What do people in Cleveland care about North Beach?"

"Tourists care about North Beach. I write a travel column."

"Yes, of course." She wasn't impressed. "Why do you want to talk to me?"

"I'm writing a piece on North Beach and how it has changed over the years. I was told that you might be able to tell me about the old North Beach."



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"Who told you that?"

"Some of the people I've talked to on the street."

She smiled. A heretical smile, actually.

"What would you like to know?" she asked.

"I would like to know about your past."

"My past?" Her eyelids fluttered. "It was not very exciting. In fact, it was very ordinary."

"What is ordinary for North Beach is special for Cleveland," I said.

"I suppose so." Her smile was unnerving.

"And people's lives are usually more interesting than they think they are."

"Are they?"

I couldn't tell whether she was buying my line or not.

"Yes. May I ask you a few questions about your life?"

Her eyes shifted to Brian and then back to me.

"If you really want to ask them," she said. "But I assure you that my life has not been very interesting." She turned and swayed back to the stuffed chair. Brian brought two metal chairs from the kitchen and we sat down. The light from the cheap lamp cast harsh shadows on her face.

"Now Mister, what did you say your name was?"

"Miller," I said.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Miller. How could I forget that? It's such a common name, isn't it? Now, what would you like to know?"



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Well, one of the first things people think of when they think of North Beach is Broadway and the strip joints."

"Is that what they think?"

"Well, yes." I didn't like the way the conversation had begun. "I understand you were once a stripper," I said.

She quickly looked at Brian.

"Am I wrong?" I asked.

"No, no," she fluttered. "You have it right." She crossed her legs. "You journalists have a way of getting right to the heart of the matter."

"If you don't want to talk about it we can talk about something else," I said, sensing her uneasiness.

"What else would people in Cleveland like to read about?" Her mouth smiled but her eyes remained cold. She was on her guard but she spoke with a disarming easiness.

"The old and the new?" I said. "People always like to read about how things have changed, how the good old days have gone."

"Ah, the good old days," she nodded. "There were real night clubs back then. And the comedy clubs!" She suddenly came alive and spoke with infectious enthusiasm. "But sadly they are gone. I really think the good old days ended when *The Green Apple* closed, don't you?"

"Yes," I nodded. "That certainly left a void."

Heat rose from her eyes.

"Would you happen to have any old pictures?" I asked.

She looked at Brian then back at me. I thought she was going to say no.



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"I don't mean X-rated." I said.

"What do you mean?" she inquired. She almost spoke with a Southern accent.

"Oh, something innocent. Suitable for the newspapers."

"Suitable for the newspapers!" she laughed.

"For Cleveland newspapers," I said. "Pictures that would show how things were in the old North Beach, you know, so I could do a before and after."

"Well, I may have something." She motioned to Brian. He left the room and returned with a box. Irene opened it and shuffled through some pictures. I recognized a young Sidney in several of them and tried to contain my excitement, but I'm sure my eyes widened a wee bit. The photos didn't look very incriminating to me, just Sidney and Irene holding each other and smiling at the camera. I perused the photos.

"Yes, these are very good," I said. "Just what the people in Cleveland would like to see."

"Are they?"

"Yes. I'd like to buy them from you." I knew Sidney would put up the cash.

"All of them?"

"As many as you would like to sell." She'd get suspicious if I showed interest only in the ones with Sidney in them. At times I can be very clever, don't you think?

She looked at me. Her eyes had cooled.



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"I'm afraid not," she said. She took the photos back, placed them in the box and handed it to Brian. I watched intently as he took them back to the other room.

"I can pay you a good price," I said.

"It's not the money," she said. "They have sentimental value. These photos are all that remain of my life. I can't possibly part with them."

"Do you have the negatives? I could make copies."

"No, there are no negatives. All I have are those pictures. They are all that remain of my 'good old days'."

"I see. Well, think about my offer, would you?"

"I won't change my mind."

"If you do, leave a message for me at the Kensington Park Hotel."

She smiled and rose from her chair.

"Now I'm afraid I must go, Mr. Miller," she said. "Brian and I help a friend clean up his restaurant every night. He closes at midnight."

I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes to twelve.

"I'm sorry I've taken so much of your time," I said. "I do appreciate your cooperation."

"It's been my pleasure." Her handshake was sly.

"Please think about those photos," I said. "I'd settle for even just a few of them."

"Perhaps I could spare one," she said. "I'll think about it. No promises, though."

"Fair enough," I said.



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Brian led me to the door and closed it behind me. I walked down the stairs and out of the building. Even as I climbed into the Rolls I felt as if I was being watched.

"Does she have the pictures?" James asked.

"Yes," I said. "I offered to buy them but she wouldn't sell."

"Pity, sir."

\* \* \*

"She won't sell them?" Sidney screamed. He was unhappy.

"No."

"Winston, I've got to have those photos!" he yelled. His voice sounded like an Austin Healy 3000 on five cylinders. Do you know what an Austin Healy 3000 sounds like on five cylinders? No, you probably don't. Well, it's damned unpleasant.

"If she won't sell them to you then you'll have to get them some other way," Sidney continued. "Money is no obstacle."

"I'll do my best."

There was a pause.

"I'm sorry, Winston. I know you will. I didn't mean to suggest you wouldn't. It's just that you know how important this election is to me."

"Yes, I'm beginning to."

"Good. I knew I could count on you."

"I don't have them yet."

"But you will get them. I know it. Good job."

\* \* \*



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It was a crowded North Beach Saturday night. The neon lights buzzed electric excitement and the magical aroma of garlic and olive oil carried on the sea breeze. James parked the Rolls near Irene's building.

"They should be gone by now," I said. It was a few minutes before midnight. "If you have any trouble finding the box, go to the window. I can see it from here."

"Yes, sir."

"Otherwise, I'll just wait for you. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir."

James left the Rolls and walked down the sidewalk. I rolled down the window and rested my arm on the sill. I'm not a chauffeur so I'm allowed to do that. Seconds later two familiar looking men passed by carrying suitcases. One of them wore sunglasses even though it was night. He had short hair that stood straight up. The other man kept his head down but I was sure I had seen him somewhere before. It bugged me.

"Good night, Mr. Churchill," one of them said to me as they passed.

Those words were like ice cubes on my spine. Whoever they were they knew my name! By the time I recovered and went after them they were gone. North Beach had engulfed them.

I ran back to the Rolls and found James leaning out of the window of Irene's apartment. Something was wrong. The long-haired man was no longer on the steps. He had probably found a new home, steps with running water or



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a better view. I dashed into the apartment building. The lobby was quiet. Much too quiet. I was no longer being watched.

I jumped up the stairs with all the getup of one of Maranello's finest and dashed into Apartment 31. The apartment was not dark. An unshaded light bulb hung from the ceiling and created film noir shadows. I know a vacant apartment when I see one and this was definitely a vacant apartment.

"James, what's going on?"

"This was on the chair," he said.

"What is it?" I asked, taking the large envelop from him.

"It has your name on it, sir."

"What?" My stomach felt funny. "I used an alias with her. How did she know my real name?" I ripped open the envelope and took out a letter. It read:

My Dear Mr. Winston Churchill,

I know who you are and I know that Sidney sent you. I had been warned that if he ever wanted to get those photographs back he would surely ask someone like you to do it. I did well to heed those warnings for you were very good. It was not until I tricked you into revealing your true knowledge of the old North Beach that I was certain it was you (who in Cleveland would have known about "The Green Apple"?).

I realize that you probably do not know the real significance of those pictures. If you did, I am sure you would never have agreed to obtain them for Sidney. He probably told you that I would use them to blackmail him. Let me tell you the true story.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

I do not know how well you know Sidney. Socially, he appears to be an angel. Personally, he can be a real bastard. I am not going to go into all of the sordid details, but suffice it to say that he is not above inflicting bodily harm. We had a very turbulent relationship those many years ago, and although it is now over, I still do not trust him.

So you see, I must keep those photographs. They are my only form of protection against this man who can be such a monster. Rest assured that I will not use them to blackmail Sidney. I have no vendetta, and as long as he stays away from me I will cause him no harm. I am leaving the country with Brian and hope that the distance will protect me from any further intrusion caused by Sidney Felstein. I am leaving him a poster from my entertaining days which he might care to possess; and I remain, dear Winston Churchill,

Very truly yours,

Irene Atom

"Ha!" My fingers were numb.

"Sir?"

I handed James the letter, unfolded the poster, and received a second shock. The poster was from Finocchio's. Above a picture of a young Irene Atom were the words: *Irene Atom, Female Impersonator.*

"It's her!" I yelled.

"Him," James said.

"Yes, him."

"We've been had, sir."



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"Indeed, we have." I looked at the poster again. I was a bit miffed yet I couldn't help but admire the way in which Irene had outsmarted me.

"What a clever woman," I said. I couldn't keep the grin from my face.

"Man, sir."

"Yes, man. James, I think I shall keep this poster for myself."

"Very good, sir."

I went to the open window and stared at the North Beach streets that had helped Irene Atom elude my grasp. The cool bay air slapped my face.

"Good night, Irene!" I said.