

KERFUFFLE WITH THE SHUFFLE

By Rob Steele

ComiPaloozaCon isn't usually that big a deal, for the homicide department, I mean. Sure, last year we had that dust up with the cast of Bristlemoon, but I thought that was an isolated incident. Conferences and conventions happen all the time around here and there are no issues. I thought that right up until I saw the body of Amon Meyer.

Rather unceremoniously spread over the sidewalk right outside the convention center, his face covered in, well, blue – concentrated around his mouth. I suppose it's only luck that a jogger found him before the convention really got started. Only a few convention campers are out this early. Who am I kidding? It's not quite 5:30 AM. *I'm* usually not even out this early.

Doctor Seong-ho Young is examining the body and I really *don't* want to ask the question running through my head. Normally, I ask something that makes sense to the case like 'was he killed with that gun?' or 'do we have an ID?' But because of the blue stuff, all I can think to say is "Doc, please tell me he wasn't killed while blowing a Smurf, or one of those Avatar things."

Doc stops his examination to cross his arms and cover his mouth with the back of one semi-clinched hand – presumably to stifle a chuckle. It doesn't work. "That is not something that would have occurred to me, Coop," he replies. "But I'll check if you really want me to." I shake my head and mentally give a sigh of relief. "We'll have to check with the lab but I'm pretty sure this blue stuff is pool cue chalk. Lividity also suggests that he wasn't killed here. This looks a lot like a body dump to me."

"Got time of death?"

Doc shakes his head once before being interrupted by a beeping from the body. His attention returns to the corpse and he rolls him slightly to retrieve a thermometer. The murders don't bother me nearly as much as seeing him pull a thermometer from a body like that. It's just... chilling. After a few quick mental calculations Doc says, "last night around 10 or so."

I suppose that's something. The convention goes well into the morning hours, which pretty much verifies that he didn't die here. Someone would have seen him before this morning and called it in. Just because these people dress up like comic book and movie characters, doesn't mean they're not decent people. Of course, I think that as a one of the camper's tents just beyond the crime scene tape opens to a billow of smoke revealing Doctor Doom, Harley Quinn and Cruella DeVil. That's one hell of a threesome. Or is it a threesome from hell?

I just shake my head and send Officer Scott Walker over to get their statements and possibly identify the type of smoke. I help Doc Young get the body bagged and loaded in the coroner's van. "Short of help this week," he explains. "But getting a new assistant soon." That's good to know. I know he could use more than just him in the office.

Officer Walker returns and reports that the smoke is mostly tobacco and incense. At my irritated urging, he continues with their statement, which is, basically, 'we didn't see anything.' After an eye-rolling that is probably not interpreted as the scolding I'd like to give him, I send Officer Walker to get statements

from as many of the campers as he can, and I return to the station to do some checking on Amon Meyer.

I find it odd that his wallet and cellphone were left in his pockets. And subdivision casual, kakis and a sweater vest, doesn't exactly strike me as the attire one wears to a convention like this. I do some checking and it seems that Amon Meyer is an accountant with Topel, Grant and Francis. He's also married with one kid who just graduated high school. That's never good to hear. I suppose the kid will be old enough to handle it better than if he were...

Hang on a minute. The kid's name is Oscar? Who names their kid Oscar Meyer? I suppose someone has to, but that seems awfully cruel. I might just make the kid a suspect. It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest. It wasn't that long ago when we had that kid finally snap after years of being called Scooby Dew. Yeah, it's spelled differently but children shouldn't be tortured like that.

As I start to head to the Meyer house to question Sheila, the wife, and the unfortunately named Oscar, when Detective Manny Vasquez appears at my desk, which is startling enough but he does that and I'm almost used to it, and tells me that she's already here and wants to talk to me. Saves me a trip I suppose. I tell Manny to show her in.

I'm not sure what I was expecting in terms of appearance, but this wasn't exactly it. Where Amon was somewhere between Sheldon Cooper and Mr. Rogers, Sheila was somewhere between Gillian and Pamela Anderson. But, hey, I figure if Ric Ocasek can land Paulina Porizkova, there's hope for everyone. "Lieutenant Wright? Please don't send me around to another office again. I've been bounced around enough for one morning."

She goes on to explain how she came to the station this morning to report her husband missing. He didn't come home last night and she was worried about him – which is understandable. But when she got here, she was told that missing persons required 24-hours for an official report but someone would be with her soon. Then she was sent to traffic to take care of his car, which was towed in this morning for being in a no-parking zone. Then she was rather unceremoniously told her husband might be dead and to come see me. I need to have a talk with the chief again. Our internal communications system is horrid.

"Unfortunately, I believe we do have your husband. I'll have Detective Vasquez take you to verify everything shortly. But I have a couple of questions, if you're up to it." She sobbed lightly but nodded. "Ma'am, I need to know where your husband was last night. Was he attending the ComiPaloozaCon?"

"No," she replied instantly. "He wasn't into that kind of stuff. He was at his poker game. He meets with a few guys at a bar somewhere once a week. Nothing big. Just a friendly game."

"Do you know where or the names of any of the other people?"

She thought while dabbing at her tears with a handkerchief she pulled from her purse. "No," she finally replied. "I always meant to ask. I always thought there'd be time to find out later. And names? There's a 'Robin' and an 'Al.' I know that's not going to help much."

"That's ok, ma'am. I do have one other question, where is your son, Oscar?"

Sheila looked appalled. "You don't think he killed his own father, do you?!"

I raised my hands in surrender. "I don't know what to think at this point but I have to ask. It's my job to cover all the bases. And we had a case not that long ago where a kid with an easily teasing name killed a parent. And Oscar Meyer, I mean no offense, but ..."

"I actually like it," said a muffled voice from somewhere behind her. She reached behind her and retrieved a cellphone, presumably from a back pocket.

"Oscar? Is that you?" she asked. She pressed the speakerphone button so I could listen in.

"Mom, you butt dialed me about half an hour ago. But I heard what was going on and have been listening." The background sounded busy with a female voice making an inaudible announcement. "I'm at the airport, I'll be back soon."

I look skeptically at Mrs. Meyer. "You're leaving town?" I ask.

"Coming back, Lieutenant. I'm in Copenhagen with several of my friends. Graduation trip. I loved my dad, sir. So not only did I not kill my dad, I wouldn't have wanted to. My name is working out great. Everybody wants a piece of me."

"Oscar!" Mrs. Meyer scolded and switched off the speakerphone before whispering, "you better be using," she covered her mouth in what can only be described as an attempt to further conceal the conversation, "condoms! Oh, I hate that word!"

I quite easily hear the reply of the teenager, "Mom! Now is not the time!" And that's all I cared to hear. Oscar is right. Now is not the time. I flag Manny down and have him escort Mrs. Meyer to Doctor Young's office. Oscar seems to be off the hook and Mrs. Meyer's constrained grief appears genuine so I'm going to put them both in the 'unlikely' category. But a poker game at a bar might just explain the blue chalk around Amon's mouth... might.

After she leaves, I call Doc Young and let him know the wife is on the way for a positive ID. Doc thanks me for the heads up and says that Amon was beaten. Choking on the blue chalk is what killed him but the broken ribs didn't help. So, now I have a better theory of what happened. My first guess would be someone tried to cheat at a poker game. But where would the game have been?

The best place to start would be with Amon Meyer's car. I check with traffic and find that the car was parked in what I call a time-delay no-parking area. Between the hours of x and y, it's ok. But one minute over...! And I do know some of our traffic cops that just wait by those zones.

And, right in the middle of this zone was a bar called Norman's. I know the place, in passing, of course. It has a reputation for not entirely playing by the rules, which is why I get everything in order before I go, including backup. Gambling is illegal unless you have licenses or connections. And Norman's is set up like a speakeasy-type casino. The front door is one of those with the eye-slit and you have to knock and say a password to get in. Or course, the password is written on a sign out front. I guess it's a kind of 'role play' thing.

The difference between Norman's and a real casino is the winnings. The slot machines let you win tokens for more games or drinks, same with the other games, like blackjack and poker. You don't really win money, and that, somehow, makes it okay. But it doesn't surprise me that there might be an actual money game going on here.

Just before I knock on the door, I borrow a nightstick from one of the SWAT guys. The slit slides open and a gruff voice says, "Sorry buddy, we're closed."

Before the slit can be closed, I shove the nightstick in the way and reply, "Sorry buddy, I've got a warrant. I guess house loses. Open the door." I hear a mumbled curse and the breaking of glass. I step out of the way and let SWAT take it from here. I never understood those tv shows where the main character goes in ahead of SWAT without body armor and armed with just a pistol. If I'm going in first in a situation like this I'm going to be armored and have a nice big gun with me. I've even gotten my own personal (but department owned) FN P90, compact submachine gun. Oh, it's nice. It's also back at the station.

So, I wait outside until the noise dies down. Thankfully no gunfire. I hate the paperwork. Sergeant Sonjay Bhalla eventually gives the all clear and Detective Vasquez and I enter. It's both not as bad as I thought it would be and worse at the same time. The glass we heard breaking came from a waitress who dropped a tray when the big guy at the door tried to run out the back. Again, unlike tv shows, we have someone covering all the exits.

Sgt. Bhalla hands me all of the wallets he's collected so we can ID everyone. The waitress is Carla Martinez. She doesn't really look old enough to be in here, much less serving drinks. That's when I look at my watch. It's almost noon. I look to the big guy who tried to run out the back, he tries to look back but with the position he's being restrained in, I can see why it's not terribly successful. His ID says Claudio Honeycutt and, judging from his size, I'm guessing he's only here as security. He mumbles something about this being a private game by invitation only, and how it's been going on since last night.

That might explain the four overdressed gentlemen at the poker table. It doesn't really surprise me to find Killian Ormonde here. He's a bit of a local legend, what with him being a former professional poker player. Heard he made the final table in the World Series of Poker, once. The others are Connor James, mid-20s and trying to look more impressive than he is – his suit is gaudy and his chest is unnaturally puffed up.

The other two are Robin Street and Al Carter. Robin and Al – the two names Sheila mentioned. I get the feeling we're in the right place. I notice a pool table in the back with a broken cue on it. I tell Manny to go check it out. "So, gentlemen. Who wants to tell me what happened to Amon Meyer?"

Robin and Al exchange guilty looks and behind me I hear Claudio struggle a bit. "Is that what this is about?" wheezes Killian Ormonde. "We invited Robin and Al. They've been here before and are good enough for our big game. *They* brought that little weasel. They said he was good enough, but he broke the rules. Every month we meet. Everyone brings a deck. Mr. Meyer brought a marked deck. We had Claudio rough him up a bit and take him home. Nothing to the face. That's one of our rules here. Body only. And that's all there is to it." He sneered, "is he pressing charges?" He began to laugh but started wheezing so bad he took to an oxygen tank next to his chair at the table.

I turn back to Claudio. "So, you beat him with a pool cue," I glance at Manny who nods, affirming my claim, "and what? Make him eat the chalk?" The SWAT officer cuffs Claudio before letting him upright so he could look me in the face when he answers.

"What of it? Yeah, he choked a bit but he was fine when I dropped him off."

“At the convention center? Why not just let him take his car and go home?”

At my questions, Ormonde stares daggers at Claudio. “You said he needed help to get home. What did you do, Claudio?”

Claudio seems to deflate a little and looks ashamed. “Gee boss. He wasn’t breathing when I got him outside. I knew we couldn’t have someone find him here. And with that chalk on his face he looked like one of those aliens from... from... that movie. The one with the blue aliens! So, I thought he’d fit in at that convention thing. I’m sorry boss.”

“Not half as sorry as you’re gonna be!” Ormonde turned to me. “Lieutenant, I do apologize. I will try to make this right by the family. We’re not criminals. Just card players. I know I can’t replace the man of the house, at least not at my age...” He tried to laugh but it only turned into more wheezing. He dons his oxygen mask and shrugs. He looks actually apologetic. We take them all in anyway. Actual gambling without a license is still a crime. As far as I’m concerned, they all participated in the murder of Amon Meyer. Let the DA sort them out.

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After the booking of the whole poker gang, I place a call to Sheila Meyer. I figure she’d want to know the story. I tell her about how he got in over his head in the whole poker thing. I explain how it wasn’t a good idea to try to cheat this kind of people, and she responds with tears – easily audible over the phone.

“He wasn’t cheating,” she sobbed. “I bought those cards for Oscar. He’s performing a magic show at the temple next week. I didn’t know Amon would take the *marked* cards!” I listen and try to console her and also make a note to send one of our counselors to see her.

And I debate with myself over what to do. If I can hold Robin Street and Al Carter responsible for Amon Meyer’s death, should I hold Sheila responsible for supplying the cards, too?