

Seriously!?**A Hotdog Sign, Misophonia and a Giant Rabbit**

by Charlotte Stuart

Someone put a 6-foot-tall hotdog display sign in Blanche Billy's yard. The human-sized hotdog had black stick-figure legs and feet and a smiling face with a mustard collar and a necktie composed of onion slices, but no other "clothes" or body parts. The hotdog stand owner tracked it down the first time it went missing, so he knew where to start looking when it went missing a second time. And a third. Finally, he got tired of retrieving it and chained the giant hotdog to a cement block.

Unfortunately, that didn't solve Blanche's problem. Other advertising signs continued to find their way to her front yard. One-sided and two-sided, ceramic, plastic, aluminum and wood. Some rusted out in places, others almost like new. Each for a different product, but with an emphasis on slurping, chewing or crunching. Slush puppies and cold drinks in frosted cans. Smokeless "chaw" tobacco. Crackers. Chips. Some, like the hot dog, were display signs that stood up on their own. Others were left propped against her deck. Blanche had no idea who they belonged to and turned to my mother to help her drag them around back. That's how I got involved.

I'm a claims adjuster for *Universal Heartland Liability and Casualty Assurance Company of America, Incorporated. The Company with a Heart ♥*. It's a lot to say in one breath, but I've practiced until I only occasionally wheeze at the end like a bagpipe with a collapsed airbag. Because I investigate claims, my mother assumed I could investigate the unwanted signs that kept showing up in her neighbor's yard.

"What's with the food signs, anyway?" I asked my mother.

“Huh? Miso-what?”

“Phonia. She flies into a rage when she hears slurping or chewing.”

“Really?”

“Those sounds are as loud to her as a dog whistle to a dog. She told me it’s like a jackhammer going off in her head. The noise drives her berserk.”

“Must be hard for her to eat out.” My mother’s disapproving frown took me back to my 12-year-old-self caught smoking behind the garage. “I thought you didn’t like her,” I said defensively.

“I feel sorry for her. That’s why I want you to investigate.” She paused. “But don’t chew that gum you always have in your mouth around her. And don’t accept a cup of coffee—not with *your* manners.” She paused again. “Just check out the signs, OK? Get the perp’s fingerprints off them.”

My mother has her faults, but she’s my mother. So, there I was on a beautiful Sunday morning in my 2001 yolk-yellow Saturn that I call Bee, for obvious reasons, on my way to solve a crime without my 4M KidszLabs fingerprint kit. It had been used up before I’d reached puberty. I would have to rely on old-fashioned methods.

When I arrived at Blanche Billy’s house, I noted there was a new sign out front. For Dutch Potato Chips, *crunchy to the last bite*. They sounded good.

Too late I remembered my mother’s warning not to chew gum in front of Blanche. I spit out the Clove wad—it had lost its flavor anyway—and stuck it to the back of the sign as I headed up the front steps. It was hardly noticeable next to a crusty rust spot.

Blanche was expecting me. I followed her down the hall past a couple of “Thank you for not chewing or slurping” signs. They looked professional and had nice colorful frames. She didn’t offer me anything to drink or eat but got right down to business.

“I want you to find out who is doing this and make them stop.”

“Do you have any idea who’s leaving the signs in your yard?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be hiring you to find out.”

She seemed like a nice lady, but technically, she wasn’t hiring me. I was doing this as a favor to my mother. “How about I put up a couple of cameras?”

“I thought you would be doing a stakeout.”

That would cost my mother extra. “When do the new signs usually appear?”

“The day after I get rid of the previous one.”

“Okay. I’ll pull the potato chip sign around back and see what happens tonight.”

At dusk, I parked just down the street with an unobstructed view of Blanche’s front yard and enough junk food to last the night. I’d also put up two cameras, so I felt confident I would have the case wrapped up by Sunday morning.

Unfortunately, I fell asleep. As my head jerked up, I thought I saw a giant pink rabbit running down the sidewalk, disappearing into the darkness beyond the weak rays of streetlight.

There was a piece of paper under my windshield wiper. Did I get a ticket for something? I slipped it out from under the wiper. It looked like a ransom note, the words cut out of some magazine: **GotCHA sleepYhead**. Then I noticed the new sign leaning up against Blanche’s deck, illuminated by the porch light: the figure of a young girl eating tomato soup with a spoon, her lips pursed to . . . sip.

Even without audio, that sign might cause Blanche to fly into a rage. My mother wasn't going to be all that pleased either. Hopefully the cameras caught the miscreant in the act.

I dragged the latest addition to Blanche's yard art collection around back. It was the least I could do. But when I went to check the cameras, there was nothing but empty screw holes in the wood. The "miscreant" was upgraded to "thief" in my book.

It was at that point that I noticed Blanche's front door was open a few inches. I went up the steps, pausing to listen before knocking softly. "Mrs. Billy," I called through the opening. "It's John Smith." I would like to say that I sensed something was wrong when she didn't answer or when I pushed the door and something prevented it from opening all the way. Turning sideways, I squeezed inside, catching the front of my leather jacket on the door snick. Focused on examining the scratch mark on my prized jacket, I didn't notice Blanche Billy's body . . . until I stumbled over it.

I saved myself from falling alongside her by grabbing a hall table, knocking over a vase of flowers.

"Sorry," I said to the prone Mrs. Billy. I was about to offer to replace the vase when it occurred to me that she probably wasn't going to care. I took out my phone and dialed 911.

I was waiting out front in Bee when the police arrived.

"Nice car," the officer said. I could have done without the smirk.

His badge #738 identified him as Officer Copp. He asked me for my name, and when I told him, he looked skeptical. "Could I see some ID?" Seriously?! Officer *Copp* was concerned about *my* name.

I hung around until the ambulance arrived and I overheard someone tell Officer Copp that it looked like a possible heart attack. I hadn't seen any blood or wounds or telltale marks on her neck. Still, I felt certain my mother would be suspicious. And she was.

That evening over dinner, she argued that Blanche's death, *if* a heart attack, was most certainly brought on by something terrible that happened to her. "Maybe she caught the perp in the act."

Her tone was accusing; *that* was what *I* was supposed to have done.

"Or maybe those kids who taunted her all the time by making loud chewing and slurping noises went too far. Maybe they got a megaphone and blasted her with sounds. And her heart gave out."

"You'd make a good criminal," I observed. Although I was fairly certain I couldn't have slept through that.

"Or maybe an elderly neighbor she jilted thirty years ago was the person leaving the signs in her front yard. When she realized it was him, it broke her heart."

She was on a roll.

"And let's not forget her son. He desperately wanted her to move into assisted living. He could have been putting the signs in her yard to convince her to leave."

"That makes sense," I said. Sons can sometimes get desperate when dealing with difficult mothers.

"Or, maybe the hotdog vendor blamed her for taking his sign and was seeking revenge."

Belatedly getting into the brainstorming spirit, I made a grievous error by saying, "Maybe it was the big pink rabbit."

"What big pink rabbit?"

Oh no! I'd let the big pink rabbit out of the hat! And I couldn't think of any way to quickly put it back, so I confessed to seeing a big pink rabbit running down the street after the sign was left in Blanche's yard.

"You saw a giant pink rabbit running away?" Her voice echoed the same disbelief I'd heard as a youngster when trying to explain that someone else must have eaten the cookies.

"Probably a person in a rabbit suit," I amended. "Or I was dreaming."

"Dreaming?" The compressed lines around her mouth told me I'd stepped in it a second time.

"I *may* have dozed off at some point."

"You dozed off. Saw a giant pink rabbit when you woke up. Someone took your cameras, left another sign, and my vulnerable neighbor had a heart attack. That about sum it up?" She sounded like my third-grade math teacher. I had never liked Mrs. Hemingway.

"When you put it that way—"

As she left, my mother said, "Get a grip, Johnny. Figure this out."

A week passed. I was "getting a grip" by *not* thinking about Blanche Billy. The police ruled her death accidental. Life went on as usual.

Until the day I saw a giant pink rabbit in broad daylight.

I was driving past a strip mall, and there he was on the corner. A huge pink rabbit holding an arrow-shaped sign advertising a mattress sale. I pulled over to the curb and started to get out of my car when the rabbit turned in my direction, saw me, dropped his sign and started running. What else could I do? I went after him.

He ran to the end of the block and turned right onto a busy street. Out of the corner of my eye I saw people laughing and pointing. I hoped they were laughing at the rabbit and not at me chasing him. Maybe they thought it was a publicity stunt.

I'm not in the best of shape. Hey, I lead a sedentary life. And I like burgers and pizza. OK, I probably also drink too much beer. But obviously the rabbit guy didn't just eat carrots. He started to slow down about the same time I started wondering how long I could keep up the chase. His decrease in speed motivated me to put on some steam. When I got close, I lunged. We went down together in a heap of pink fur and floundering appendages. Before he could regain the upper hand, er, furry foot, I yanked his head off. We both froze and stared at each other.

The crowd that had gathered started making remarks. "That rabbit's foot wasn't all that lucky." Ha ha. "Which one of you is harebrained?" Ha ha. "Citizen's arrest? What did the rabbit do—miss a bunny support payment? Steal a kid's Easter eggs?"

"You shouldn't have done that," rabbit man said as he shoved me aside.

"I know it was you. You killed Blanche Billy."

The crowd fell silent.

"You heard me," I said. "I know you killed her, and I'm going to prove it."

"You can't prove it because I didn't do it."

"We'll see about that." The crowd backed away as we stood up. A few were on their phones taking pictures. I thought about asking one of them to send me a copy to give to my mother.

"Show me some ID," I said to rabbit man.

"Why should I?"

“Because you either show it to me, or I’ll have one of these photographers send your picture to the police.” He looked around and seemed to realize for the first time that we had an audience.

“OK. Let’s go somewhere and talk,” he said.

We walked back in the direction of the strip mall with a few stragglers in tow, still taking pictures and videos. I wondered if we’d trend on YouTube. The last of them gave up when we stopped at a coffee shop. “Hope they don’t discriminate against rabbits,” someone yelled as we went inside. They needn’t have worried; the young guy behind the counter didn’t even take a second look. A headless rabbit ordering a decaf coffee. Even at his tender age, he’d seen it all.

“Okay,” I said as we sat down. “My first demand is that you give me back my cameras.”

For a moment I thought he was going to deny being responsible for the signs and for removing my cameras, but he didn’t. “They’re kinda cheap.”

“But you stole them, that’s a criminal act.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll return them. Don’t get excited.”

“Now, let’s see some ID.” When he hesitated, I pointed out that I knew his current place of employment. He reluctantly pulled out his driver’s license: Lane Hopkins.

“Seriously? Hopkins?”

He shrugged.

“Tell me about the signs.”

“What’s there to say? Someone offered me a few bucks to put them in her yard. I assumed it was some kind of prank. Seemed harmless enough.”

“You do know she died.”

“Yeah, I was sorry to hear that.”

“Really?”

“It was easy money.”

“You don’t think it was your fault?”

“How could it have been *my* fault?”

“Did she catch you that night?”

“No, I never saw her.” When I raised my eyebrows and gave him the sideways questioning look, he repeated, “Never.”

“So, it didn’t matter to you *who* you were playing tricks on? Or why?”

“Well, I thought leaving the note on *your* car was pretty funny.”

“Yeah, funny,” I said dismissively. “So where did you steal the signs from?”

“I didn’t steal them. They were left on my porch for the purpose.”

“Who hired you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

He shook his head. “I was never introduced. They called me and offered me the gig. On a burner phone.”

“How do you know it was a burner phone?”

“I tried to get in touch, ah, about payment. I wanted a little more.”

“How were you paid?”

“Cash in an envelope in my mail box”

“Give me the number.” He took out his phone and texted the number to me. I tried calling, but no one answered.

“What about the original message? You still have it?”

“No.”

“Voice— Male? Female? Young? Old? Any accent?”

“Low, husky, not young. Probably male. Could have been female with a low voice and a hand over her mouth. Nothing distinguishing.”

“What about the envelopes left in your mailbox—have any of them?”

“They’re probably still in my recycle container; I haven’t put it out for a while.”

We agreed to meet when he got off from work so I could go with him to check out his recycle.

I almost didn’t recognize him without the rabbit suit, but the head tucked under his arm was a giveaway.

It turned out he still had two of the envelopes. I “incentivized” a friend at the police department with some primo tickets to an upcoming game to take a look at the them. He found two sets of fingerprints. One belonged to Hopkins, but the other wasn’t listed anywhere. My mother was thrilled. From her point of view, I had a hot lead. A “not young” male or female who had enough money to pay in cash for a prank that had turned deadly and whose fingerprints weren’t on file. Not exactly hot. Not even lukewarm.

It would be nice if I could claim to have solved the case through solid investigative techniques and my little grey cells. But it was simple dumb luck. No one was answering the number Hopkins had given me, so I decided to take another look at the signs. It was more curiosity than a hunch. I arrived in Blanche Billy’s back yard just in time to catch someone else going through the signs. An older woman wearing a purple sweatpants suit and a guilty expression.

“Can I help you?” I asked as if I was the owner of the property and not a trespasser like her.

She hastily shoved back the sign she’d been trying to drag out from behind the others.

“No, no, I’m fine.” She had a low, husky voice. Probably owned a burner phone.

Then I said the only brilliant thing I’ve said in a long time. “Trying to take back one of your vintage signs?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m guessing you’re a neighbor. If I call the police, they’re going to find a sign collection in your garage or basement or a shed. You needed a source after the hotdog sign was no longer available. Am I right?”

“So what?” Now she was sounding panicky. Her voice was almost an octave higher, in the chitter range.

“What did Blanche do to you?”

Her shoulders drooped and tears slid down her cheeks. “I didn’t mean for her to die.”

“What *did* you mean to happen?”

“I just wanted to shake her up a bit. Like she did to everyone in the neighborhood with that stupid phobia of hers.” She took out a Kleenex and dapped at her eyes. “She terrified my grandson when all he was doing was drinking a smoothie. And she screamed at me for offering her some apples off my tree. I tried to show her how crisp they were by biting into one, and she practically ripped my head off. When I started asking around, almost everyone had a story like that. She was a menace.”

“She suffered from a condition. Surely you knew that.”

“Everybody has ‘conditions’ they use as excuses,” she said angrily. “My father *couldn’t* stop drinking—it was a disease. My brother couldn’t stop using cocaine. As for Blanche, she bullied any kids she ran into. Supposedly because she had some disorder. Baloney! I hate bullies.” Her voice had reached the operatic soprano crescendo before switching suddenly to pianissimo. “People need to exert a little control. Show respect for others.” She paused and looked at me imploringly. “Don’t you agree?”

“Okay, I get it. But what happened the night she died?”

“I gave my delivery guy the wrong sign, one that I posed for when I was a teenager. I don’t think she would have recognized me, but it was one I’d intended to keep. When I realized what I’d done, I went over to retrieve it, and she caught me. I tried to reason with her, but she screamed at me, said she was going to call the police. I kept trying to calm her down, but she got out her phone to make the call, and I made a grab for it. She wouldn’t let go and kicked me. That’s when something inside of me snapped, and I started making lip-smacking and chewing noises. I knew it was childish, but it worked. She backed away into her house and tried to close the door, but I pushed against it. Then she lost her balance and fell.”

“And you just left her there? You didn’t call for an ambulance?”

“How was I to know it was a heart attack?”

“You should have called 911.”

“I know that now, but at the time I just wanted to get away.”

I took a deep breath. What she described had the ring of truth. And she was obviously distressed by the role she’d played in Blanche’s demise. “Let’s see the sign you’re on.”

She pulled herself together, grabbed the sign with both hands and pulled. I pushed from the other side. “I’m afraid I made a mistake the other day by trying to hide it. I should have made

off with it then.” She pulled again while I pushed. Once it was free, she leaned it against the fence and we both stared at it. The years had not been kind to her. As a young girl she had been blond and innocent, a blank page looking forward to what would be written there. Now the same face was reaching its denouement and had life’s disappointments inscribed in wrinkles and age spots. It was tough not to have a certain amount of sympathy for her.

“Do you need help getting it back to your house?” I asked.

“No, I can manage on my own. But . . .” She looked questioningly at me.

“I understand that she scared your grandson, upset you and had a bad reputation in the neighborhood. And I don’t know whether her misophonia was a sufficient excuse for her behavior or not. But I do know she didn’t deserve a death sentence for anything she did. If you want to go to the police, that’s up to you. If not, well, I hope you and Hopkins have learned a lesson: Life doesn’t have any hands, but it can sure give you a hard slap sometimes. Consider yourself slapped.”

With that I walked away. I’m no avenging angel. Just a guy who investigates claims for a big insurance company. Righting wrongs isn’t in my job description. Blanche Billy’s aging neighbor had her flaws, but, all in all, she seemed like an OK person. And I rather liked the giant pink rabbit.

On the other hand, some people are like clouds—when they go away, it’s a brighter day. I had a feeling Blanche Billy was like that.