

"Cover to cover action. Never slows down."

THE SHOOTING CASE



POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

CLIFF TERRELL

New Age Detective Fiction

The Shooting Case

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The metric system never really caught on in the United States, unless you count the ever-increasing popularity of the nine-millimeter bullet.
~Dave Barry

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As winter collapsed into the onrushing arms of spring, the usually uneventful town of Coulter, Mass, was shaken by an exceptional event. Charles Appleton Jr., overachiever, above average scholar, budding entrepreneur, emissary of restrained southern charm, received a bullet to each side of the heart effectively terminating his promising life and career exactly one week before his honors graduation from Coulter College. Recipient of two hollow point 9mm. slugs instead of a *Magna cum Laude* degree, he died almost instantly.

Mrs. Thomas Loomis, stated that at 3:30am on May 27th, Charles Jr. had repeatedly knocked on the door and rung the bell of her house. Believing the intruder might need help, her husband had opened the door only to be assaulted, grabbed at the throat by a raving maniac, the life slowly squeezed out of him. Loomis freed himself, while his wife grabbed a 9mm. handgun from a hallway table and, in front of their two young children, stopped the assailant cold as he renewed his attack. While young Appleton was dying in a pool of blood on the polished vestibule floor, Mr. Loomis called the Coulter Police.

"There are no indicators that the two people in question ever knew each other," stated police spokesperson William Brainard. No trace of acquaintanceship between Junior and Peggy Loomis, or the Loomis family, for that matter. No letters, no phone calls, no visits, no e-mail, no ship-to-shore communications. Nothing at all.

On the morning following the attack, the police were at an impasse and time had not been kind to the investigation. The body tested negative for drugs and alcohol. Police interviewed Junior's college friends. Coulter detectives were dispatched to his hometown of Charlotte, NC to interview his parents and investigate his past life. After four months, "We have no idea of why Appleton was in the house," was the only conclusion the police could come to. As a consequence, Mrs. Loomis was not charged with any crime.

The summer's leafy cover came and went, the Loomis family scrubbed and scrubbed until the vestibule floor was cleansed of blood, and, once again, Coulter College prepared to greet the incoming freshman class. In effect, life went on as usual with one small exception: exactly eight months later, the Appletons, as might be

expected, did not accept the official version of their son's demise, in spite of investigators' conclusions that the boy "must have just flipped out without any reason." The Appletons contacted Trevor Nash.

Nash had read about the Appleton boy in *The Observer*. Just about everybody in Charlotte had. Not that he was surprised at being called—he wasn't—it usually took a while for a family to realize the official investigation was going nowhere.

Whipping a tight U-bee, he circled into a Myers Park driveway, pulling up in front of a white house whose tall columns overwhelmed any sense of architectural originality. On this chilly December day, Nash sat in the car, pulled out the bottle, and checked the label: SERZONE—Antidepressant. 100 mg. The final dose of the day. He shook out a tablet, gulped it down with a swig of Evian.

The maid opened the door before he could get his finger off the bell. "Mr. Appleton!" she wheezed. Nash focused on the hair. It was frizzy. Most blacks had their hair "relaxed" nowadays; it surprised him. "That detective gent yo'all's expecting..." She shot him a coy look as if she was holding something back for later, for the inevitable interview as a member of the household.

2

If rich is letting your money work for you, instead of working for money, the Appletons qualified. But that fact was somehow obscured by the shrunken state of the man who answered the maid's call. Charles Appleton's face was a mess of retracted capillaries as if he had once weighed 300 pounds and had since been ravaged by a mysterious illness that had sucked the corpulence out of his cells and left him a shriveled daddy longlegs.

"Mr. Nash?" he said, shaking Nash's hand and gesturing to an empty spot at his right that was quickly filled by a nimble old lady Nash took to be Mrs. Appleton. "This is my wife, Loretta." In turn, Mrs. Appleton took Nash by the hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Mam."

"Now, I knew a family o' Nashes from Mobile," said the old lady. "That wouldn't be your Nash family, now would it, Mr. Nash?" Nash wasn't quite sure if she had said "your nice family" or "your Nash family" but, like so much polite Southern talk, that really wasn't the point.

"Let's not kid ourselves, Mzz. Appleton. You and I both know that I'm from Hells Kitchen. You picked off my accent right away, didn't you, Mam?" After a moment's perplexity, Mrs. Appleton smiled at Nash.

Mrs. Appleton gave Nash's hand one last squeeze. It was powerful squeeze for she shared her husband's insect strength. Whatever had happened to her husband had happened to her, too.

"Loretta, Mr. Nash and I are going to sit a spell in the sunroom and might welcome some refreshment. Mr. Nash..." He led Nash into a little room that hung off the back of the house. Shuttered and shrouded by plants, the sunroom felt cool and protected, even though the direct afternoon sun beat down at an improvident 45° angle.

"Mr. Nash..." the old man gestured to a print sofa.

"Sir." Nash waited for the interview to begin.

“Yes, I like that, direct but not offensive. So many of your Northern boys don't know how to talk to our people down here.” Mr. Nash, we loved our son. He was everything to us. You see, sir, we were practically golden agers, as they say, when Charlie Junior was born.”

“If you don't mind my asking, sir, why did you wait so long to have, uh, children?”

“Tennis, Mr. Nash, was our religion. One day we went to Tampa for a mixed-doubles tournament. Mz. Appleton and I... It rained three days straight. Mz. Appleton was very insistent, and what with no tennis, nine months later, the baby was born. I had just turned 58. One boy, one life...and our life ended. So you see how this present situation weighs so heavily on us. To be parents so late in life changes a person. And the police bungling...” The old man’s eyes started to turn red.

Dried up and dehydrated longlegs though he was, Appleton still spoke like a fat man. And now that fat man—the one he’d began life as—was a prisoner, locked inside him, some sort of genetic imprint. What no fat man could ever expect—suddenly becoming thin—had happened to Appleton, but he had retained his fat man’s way with words.

But Nash wasn’t hung up on words. He’d sort them out later, after he got a dose of the gestalt: The music of the house, its smells, the people in it, their ways. Slowly, the events would piece themselves together, Nash knew, not because he was so clever, but because people were so sloppy. They liked to talk; they inevitably said something, added a twist here or there, forgot what they'd said the first time... And the lies would stagger forth like vengeful zombies, devouring their makers.

Only this time, it wouldn't work that way because there was no case, or whatever case there was, had been shut without ever being opened. And no one could pry it open now. He might pocket his two grand a week plus expenses, he could investigate in ever increasing circles of family and friends, acquaintances near and far, far and wide. Yet, he knew that he would never uncover anything. It was nailed shut like no case had ever been, just like *The Observer* had explained, “a one-in-a-million freak case that defies logical explanation because there is no logical explanation; there is, in fact, nothing at all...”

And Nash didn't believe that he was good enough to prove them wrong.

"We take it sweetened, Mr. Nash." Appleton had wrapped his arms around his legs, and now, Tabitha, the maid was serving iced tea from two different pitchers. "We can serve it unsweetened, Mr. Nash, if that's how you prefer it. Can't we, Tabitha?"

"Unsweetened is fine. I...uh...I..." The maid took her time to put down the first pitcher and pour from the second despite the suspended intonation Nash used to prod her into leaving. With more sass than a runway model, the maid lifted her eyebrows at Nash and eclipsed herself.

"What about you, Mr. Nash?" Appleton continued after the maid had gone.

Nash brought his gaze in from the titles in the bookshelf. He didn't believe Appleton was looking for a modest detective. He raised his eyes and leveled them at the old boy. "I've done some good investigative work for large firms and in the Navy, but, to be honest, this is my third private case."

"I want you to tell me why you're the right person for the job."

"Well, I was a POW. After I came back from Nam in '75, a few years of rehabilitation. Then, as a kind of compensation for three years as a POW, the Navy sent me to law school."

"Where was that?"

"UCLA, near where I was stationed. Then I went into the Judge Advocate's Corp. in '81 and stayed with that until Operation Tailgate."

"You're famous for it...should I say, Commander Nash."

"My name gives me an edge in this sort of thing. Doesn't hurt going into a new line of work, but I still have to prove I'm up to it."

"Operation Tailgate," the old man clucked, reminiscing. "If anything, the good work you did was forgotten over the years. So, Commander Nash, are you up to it?"

"There's only one way to find out, sir."

"An instant folkhero, now on the comeback trail... So why not private case work?"

The two men studied each other.

"That was in '87," Nash began again, "After the Navy, I went to New York where I worked for Federated Mortgage as Chief of Security, then in '92 I came down here to the Piedmont Bank as their Chief of Security."

The old man nodded—an active listening nod—the kind business people are trained to use to make it appear they're actually interested in what the ordinary person has to say.

"I suppose you know about that, too?" said Nash.

"I know that the high-flying '80s were coming to a close and you more or less brought down the last of the high-flyers, Grover Pitts."

"Grover and I left the bank in '96: me to Thailand for a year with my parachute kiss-off money and Grover to the state prison. When I got back, I looked around for a while."

"About two years."

"This is a small town."

"He put the word out on you to the old boys network, Mr. Nash."

"Well, it took me that long to realize that no other firm would hire me down here. Now I'm taking private cases. And here we are, wrapping up this interview so you can give me my first big case. What do you say, Mr. Appleton?"

"I'd say that would make you about 50-years-old, Mr. Nash. Investigative work is a young man's game."

"The fighting fifties."

"Yes, well, the way everyone's dragged their feet, you may need to fight before this is over."

"The job's mine?"

"For the time being, let's say yes, provisionally, that is."

"Now that's the solid kind of answer I can wrap a year's monetary prospects around."

"A year?"

"Mr. A, this case is almost a year old. There are no suspects, no leads, nothing. This is what they call in the trade, a cold case, an 'Unsolved Mystery.' After too much time, an unsolved becomes an 'unsolvable.' These cases—where the original police work might not have been done correctly or with the proper enthusiasm—can take a year, sometimes much more."

"Where do we begin, Mr. Nash?"

"I'd like to talk to the household members today," Nash continued, "and while we're at it, sir..." He brandished a small tape recorder from his pocket. The appearance of the tape machine made Appleton's eyes bug out even more. "Being that I'm over fifty, I use this to jog my memory." The old man scrutinized Nash's face for traces of irony. "I hope that's all right, sir. I like to go over it after the fact."

"I understand, Mr. Nash. Uh, well, beside my wife, there's only the maid. I'm sure she'll cooperate..."

"How long has she been with you?"

"About a year, yes... I reckon."

"So she was acquainted with your son, then?"

"He was away at his university for the most part, his affairs..."

"Affairs?"

"Yes, he had a pet groomin' business that he started all by himself while at University."

"What was the name of that business?"

"*Lush Puppies.*"

"References, sir?" The effort was showing as Mr. Appleton unwrapped his legs. Sitting once more like a former fat man, he seemed at last to have lost the thread of their conversation. "The maid," Nash prompted.

"Oh yes, we always check them. You must call around. It's a tight community down here, Mr. Nash. Not too many of our colored people are newcomers; most are known by the better families."

"If I could just get started with... Tabitha's her name? Do you recall her last name, sir? I won't take up too much of your time today." Nash clicked on the tape. Appleton frowned and cleared his throat.

"Yes, the maid... Mr. Nash. You can talk to her now."