

The Mystery in the Backyard

BY TOM CONKLIN

“**Y**ou kids keep out of my yard!” Tony and Juan looked up. Old man Kaufman stood on his back porch, shaking his fist at the two boys. Juan forced a friendly smile. “Sorry, Mr. Kaufman,” Juan said. “We tossed our ball over your fence by accident. I think it landed in your garden.” “I said go!” Mr. Kaufman yelled, his face red with anger. Kaufman grabbed a broom from the porch and started to run after the boys. Tony and Juan sprinted back to the fence and jumped over it to the safety of the alley.



“What a grouch!” Juan panted, as he and Tony stopped to catch their breath.

“Tell me about it,” Tony said. “You’re lucky to live two blocks away. I have to put up with Kaufman as a neighbor.”

“So?” Juan replied. “I’m the one who lost a baseball! What am I going to tell my dad when he asks where it is?”

Clunk!

Something had sailed over the fence and landed smack on Juan’s head. He picked it up. It was his baseball. Old man Kaufman had tossed it out of his yard.

“Thank you, Mr. Kaufman!” The boys chanted sarcastically.

“And stay out!” the old man yelled from behind the fence.

At dinner that night, Tony was whining about Mr. Kaufman.

“Whenever I walk past his house, he’s sitting on the front stoop, staring at me, like he expects me to rob him or something. I never did anything to him!”

“Mr. Kaufman has a hard life,” Tony’s mother gently explained. “I don’t know how he makes ends meet, not since he lost his job as a newspaper reporter.”



“Just because he doesn’t have a job, that doesn’t give him the right to yell at me and my friends,” Tony muttered.

Tony’s father laid down his newspaper and stared at his son. “No,” he said. “By the same token, you don’t have the right to judge him. Not unless you know what he’s gone through.” Tony’s father shook his head, then picked his newspaper back up. “Imagine what it must be like, paying rent and feeding yourself and your sick old mother . . . without a steady job!”

Something his father had said made Tony think.

Tony knew that Mr. Kaufman shared the house with his elderly mother. At nights, as he lay in bed, Tony could hear the old woman’s screechy voice as she ordered her son around.

The funny thing was, it had been weeks since Tony had seen or heard her.

Tony decided to keep an eye out for Mr. Kaufman—and his missing mother.

Two days later, Tony sat on his front stoop, reading a book. Mr. Kaufman sat on his stoop, staring at the street and not saying a word. Over the previous days, Tony hadn’t seen or heard a sign of Kaufman’s mother. Now, it was as if Kaufman were

waiting for someone. But who?

A delivery truck pulled up in front of Kaufman’s house. Tony buried his nose in his book, all the time listening closely as the delivery man trotted up to greet Mr. Kaufman.

“Sign here, please,” he said, handing Kaufman a clipboard. “Where do you want it?”

“In here,” Kaufman said, shooting suspicious looks up and down the street. He led the delivery man into his house. Tony stole a glance at the delivery—three large cardboard boxes.

Later that night, Tony glanced out the window of his family’s bathroom. From there, he could see across the yard and through a window into Kaufman’s house. What he saw surprised him. Kaufman stood alongside three empty cardboard boxes, reading a thick owner’s manual. On a desk, he had set up a brand new computer with a big, sturdy printer.

Tony gasped.

“If he’s so poor, how can he afford a new computer?” Tony asked himself.

Early the next morning, Tony’s mom pulled a full bag out of the trash can.

“I’ll take the garbage out, Mom,” Tony said, rushing up to take the bag from her. She looked at him, shocked.

“What’s gotten into him?” she asked her husband as Tony headed down the back stairs.

Once he was in the alley, Tony dropped the garbage bag into a trash can. Looking around to make sure the coast was clear, he headed to the garbage cans and stacks of newspapers outside Kaufman’s fence.

Tony gasped. Leaning against the fence were stacks of freshly bundled glossy brochures. Tony looked at them. They were advertisements for fancy cruises, resorts on tropical islands, and other costly vacations.

“If he’s so poor, why is he shopping for an expensive trip?” Tony asked himself.

The next day, Tony told Juan about his discoveries.

“It’s just like this old movie I saw,” Tony said. “I’ll bet he killed the old lady!”

“I don’t know,” Juan said. “Why would he do that?”

“So he could get all of her money, of course,” Tony said. “He killed her and took her fortune. Now he’s just waiting for a chance to get away.” Tony had a sudden thought and snapped his fingers. “I’ll bet that’s why he chased us away from his garden. That’s where he buried her body!”

Juan groaned. “I think you’re nuts.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tony replied. “If he didn’t kill her, then where is she? No one has seen her for weeks. And how was he able to afford a new computer? And why was he looking at ads for expensive trips?”

“There could be a million reasons for any of those things,” Juan said.

“Maybe,” Tony admitted. “But all together, they add up to murder.”

Juan shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said.

Tony decided to challenge his friend. “All right. Join me in some detective work. We’ll follow old man Kaufman around. If we see his mother, or learn how he’s making his money, then I’ll eat my words. If not, we’ll tip off the cops.”

Tony held out his hand. Juan hesitated a moment, then shook Tony’s hand.

It turned out that Mr. Kaufman was pretty easy to follow. Over the next few days, he only made a few trips to the corner store to buy some groceries. On Friday he went to the post office to mail some bills. That night he went to a church hall to play some bingo.

Juan and Tony followed him several steps of the way. Although Mr. Kaufman didn’t do anything suspicious, the two boys didn’t see a sign of his

mother. She'd been missing for weeks now. Tony was more certain than ever that she had been the victim of foul play.

On Saturday, the boys got a break. Kaufman left his house in the middle of the morning and shuffled off to the public library. Tony and Juan followed. They hung out in the kids' section, watching as Kaufman gathered a large stack of books from the shelves. He sat at a table, carefully going through the books and making notes of information he found in them. After four hours of work, Kaufman stood and stretched, then headed out the door.

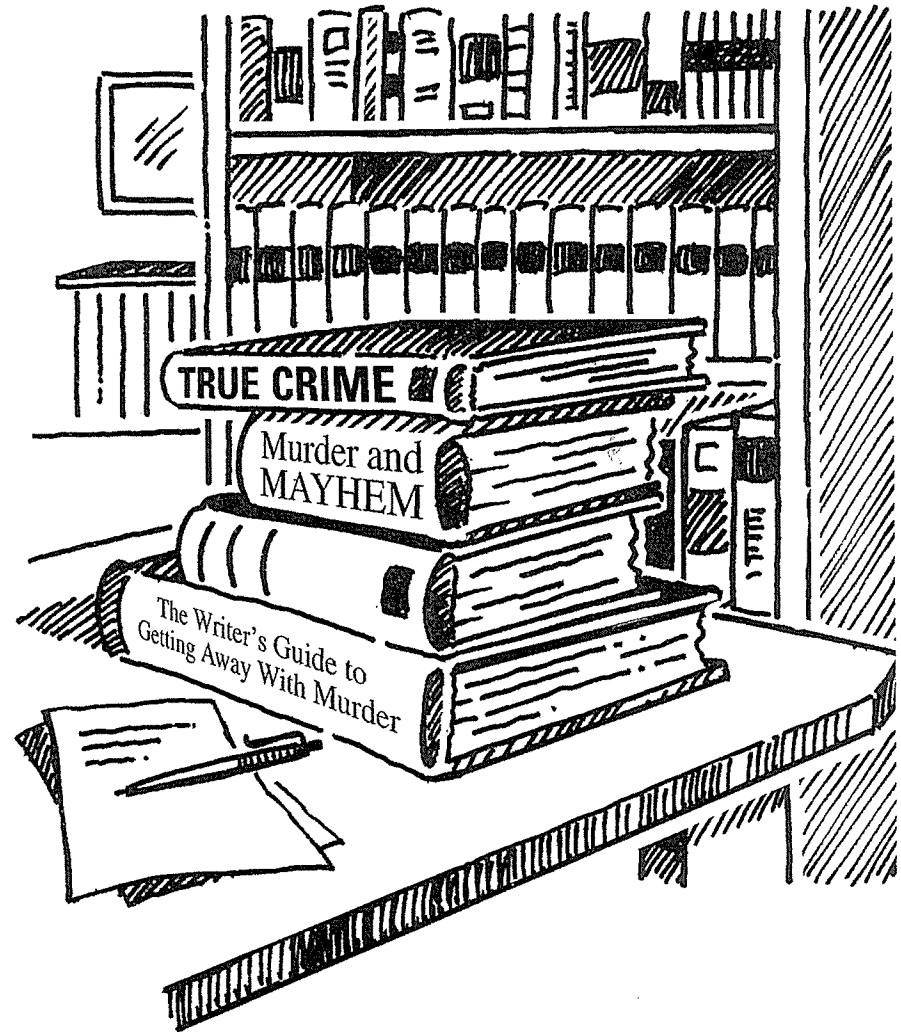
Juan moved to follow him.

"Wait!" Tony hissed. He led Juan over to the table where Kaufman had been working. Tony looked at the titles of the books Kaufman had been reading. He gasped at what he saw:

True Crime

Murder and Mayhem

The Writer's Guide to Getting Away
With Murder



"Now what do you say?" Tony asked, staring at Juan with eyes wide.

Juan gulped. "I say we should find out exactly what Kaufman has planted in his garden," Juan said.

It was dark and cloudy when the boys scrambled over the fence into Kaufman's yard late that night. His windows were black. The only sound was the distant rumble of traffic on the avenue.

"This way," Tony whispered. He led Juan to the garden.

Each boy carried a stick. As they had planned, Juan and Tony started at opposite ends of the garden, jabbing their sticks into the earth. After a few minutes of poking around, Tony's stick hit something hard about ten inches beneath the surface.

"I found something!" he hissed. Juan came to his side as Tony began to dig.

"What is it?" Juan asked.

"Sssh." Tony pulled something long and hard from the dirt.

The moon appeared from behind a cloud. A shaft of pale light fell on the yard. Tony saw what he held, then yelped with fear and dropped it.

It was a bone!



“Who’s out there?” yelled a harsh voice. It was Kaufman!

“Run!” Tony hissed.

Too late. A beam of light from a flashlight knifed from Kaufman’s porch across the yard, landing on Tony’s blinking face.

Tony sat at his kitchen table. He wished he could have been hiding under it. Juan’s parents had just left after coming to pick up their son. Now, old man Kaufman sat at the table opposite Tony, sipping a cup of coffee. Tony’s parents stood nearby. Although they were acting very nice, Tony knew that as soon as Kaufman left their smiles would disappear.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been a bad neighbor,” Kaufman said. “Privacy is important to me. Writing isn’t easy, so I don’t like to be distracted.”

“We understand,” Tony’s mom said. “And congratulations on selling your first book.”

“Thanks,” he said. “With the money I’ve earned, I was able to send my poor mother on a long vacation. Goodness knows she deserved it. And at last I was able to afford a computer.”

Tony looked at Mr. Kaufman with suspicion.

“What about the bone I found buried in your garden?” he asked.

“Promise you won’t tell the police?” Mr. Kaufman asked. “It’s against the law to bury your pets in your yard. But when our old dog Poochie died five years ago, it broke mother’s heart. We had to keep the old boy nearby.”

Tony was still not convinced. “I saw you in the library today,” Tony said. “You were reading some interesting stuff.”

“I was doing research for my next book,” Mr. Kaufman said. “This one will be a murder mystery.” He smiled at Tony. “I think I’ve got an inspiration,” Kaufman said. “It’s going to star a boy detective!”

Even Tony had to smile as the three adults broke into laughter.