

Edwin Merrick had married seven times, been divorced never, and each wife had been richer than the last. He was an athletic man, though not a spring chicken, and the guise he wore belonged to one who was gentle and kind. The women and their money won was more of an accident than a design. Edwin preferred to earn his own bread--and he earned plenty.

He was comfortable in his skin and the passion of his life was the study of human nature. It produced a neat dollar, plus benefits. The chief benefit was that he never had to wave money to attract young women; they came willingly like eager puppies anxious for a stroke. Edwin knew how to touch, and where, and when. That was the least of his magic. His sense of timing rivaled that of a watch and at a stroke one garment would disappear, then right on the tick another would drop, then another was lost until the sweet little Miss was peeled to her tender parts.

There were occasional girls who were bothered by Edwin, wondering why their names never quite registered behind his smile of nectar. Babe. No other name need apply. She was Babe. Sometimes these girls left, sad. Perhaps the old guy was losing it.

Edwin never lost anything. After miles of women, it was far easier to give them identical labels and thus simplify the equation.

He believed in Eli Whitney: interchangeable parts.

He was good for a season and a woman was adored for a season, pampered to the day when she became inconvenient. The luckier women were let go with hardly a feather ruffled. But still they cried, hearts broken, not realizing the ones who won him--married in an expensive Vegas chapel where he was unknown--seldom survived one year, for it was time for a little house cleaning.

The police were incurious about Edwin Merrick, for untimely events or his other activities, because things had a way of explaining themselves: Karen Merrick, formerly Karen Strouthuser, swerved her Mercedes into a Mac Truck. The driver had a spotless safety record, was ignorant that Merrick existed, and had a wife and five kids. The investigators tore Karen's car down to the bolts, and found it was mechanically sound prior to the wreck.

Susan Merrick swam out to sea on a sultry August day, the beach she left packed to near capacity. Alone she swam cutting a line through the water, and her attractive eyes were vacant as she pumped her limbs

furiously as though to set a record--California to Hawaii in one burst. Forensics performed a perfunctory examination and found: zip. No alcohol, no drugs, nothing but healthy female who churned herself as if seeking oblivion. Susan may have hallucinated toward the end; her black lips formed the trace of a smile.

Edwin happened to be out of town.

Ellen Merrick ingested salmonella after she started canning her own food. Ellen was on a 'back to nature' kick, an interest her husband shunned, ordering takeout while she chided him for his unhealthy eating habits and devotion to cigarettes. Ellen died with a prenup. The American Cancer Society inherited--he didn't.

Merrick placed a soft kiss upon Ellen's casket and solemnly watched it descend into the hole. Although he was grieving that morning, he wasn't too upset to escort a shapely new acquaintance to the Hollywood Bowl that night. As usual, the parking was atrocious.

Merrick owned a considerable amount of income property in South Los Angeles and had a knack for finding apartments in the lousiest part of town. He bought at fire-sale prices from sellers who couldn't make a dime. Merrick's tenants either left hurriedly or became model renters. Many of the renters paid cash and consequently he had a permit to carry a concealed firearm, beneficial for trips to the bank though his routine was to walk heavy. He ran his empire from an office building, a squat single story eyesore that had the attire of ironworks so common in the ghetto. As a proper businessman, Merrick's desk was aimed at the door. His chair was flush against the wall; his seating was always against a wall, including restaurants, bars, and cinemas—not that he ever went to any in South L.A.

He encountered angry tenants when the heating was out, or the roof leaked, or the smell of urine seeped from the walls. Merrick typically handled gripes in his office, where he had the edge. "I could've sworn that was set right," Edwin would say, the atmosphere reeking of cigarette smoke. "I'm positive the receipt is in here somewhere." He opened the desk's top drawer and hunted through disorganized paperwork. His .44 American Derringer rested on top of it all like a paperweight. Unlike a paperweight, however, it snagged his fingers. He fumbled the gun inside the drawer while he searched, though the twin barrels never drifted far from his guests' stomachs. "I was told the work order was done but you claim it wasn't?" he said kindly. "I don't understand why they did a poor job." He lifted the gun that was minus a trigger guard from one of the unexamined stacks of paper and let it drop over sharpened pencils. The minute *crack* didn't help the tenant's nerves. "It's here; Rome wasn't built

in a day as the old saying goes. What *was* your address?" Merrick was a determined, courteous, accommodating man and when the receipt didn't surface, he pledged to send over the repairman first thing in the morning.

The drawer failed to close as long as the renters were there.

Sometimes the tenants returned, more often they forgot about it, but if they did materialize, Edwin made a show of an in-depth record search, then ponied up for the repair. He forgave the cost. He liked their balls.

Caroline Forsythe was like that. In 1966 when he was an assistant professor of history, he had actually contemplated tying the knot. This was before wives became a nuisance. She had guts, heart-stopping looks, and inwardly was the exact opposite of her appearance. The boys who fell out of her hair like dandruff were blind to this, of course. They took photographs of her lounging in the quad, the better to study her in solitude. The coeds couldn't stand her, those many years ago, yet her two best friends were female. Mary Lasker had fallen off his scope during her junior year and the other, Ruth Kempter, was an egocentric prune he hadn't seen in months. He gave Ruth extra credit for marrying well and plastic surgery.

In a fixated sort of way he was still attracted to Caroline, not that he was into women who ate too much, but with Caroline and to a lesser degree Ruth, he was free to cut wild. It was liberating, intoxicating, and left him a bit shaken with himself at the conclusion of a visit. He hadn't made it with Caroline since UCLA let him go (publish or perish--who can publish with her eating his time?) and he had no physical desire to touch her thereafter. She had temporarily experimented with the swinging scene, he did detest sloppy seconds, and there were younger girls, sweeter girls, pies fresh from the oven.

But Caroline, whatever her flaws or perhaps on account of them, made life fun.

And so when she called Sunday morning and said without preamble, "Ed, why don't you cruise on over and see me?" that's precisely what he did. Merrick buttoned up his office and locked the security gate. Trade was bound to be slow anyway. It was the eighteenth of the month.

Merrick was between women and had to answer to nobody