Detective Skip Langdon, New Orleans P.D., lived in the thick of the French Quarter, and figured she was probably the only cop in the parish who did. Cops, she’d observed, were suburbanites at heart, like most of the folks in the Third District, to which she’d been recently assigned.

After working Homicide, it sometimes seemed to Skip the Third was only technically in the city. There was a housing project, but a smallish one. Most folks lived in nice subdivisions by the lake, and on the manicured streets of Gentilly (which also has a tough side, but everything is relative).

When “decentralization” came, homicide detectives became “gen dicks”, or general detectives, and in the Third, there weren’t that many homicides, anyway.

Yet Skip was staring down at a corpse in a living room in a part of Gentilly that has streets so nasty-neat you want to call a graffiti artist just to get comfortable. The living room was in a Spanish style house that looked like it had run away from Florida. The corpse had a hole in its chest.

Ironic, she thought. This is one of those neighborhoods where it just doesn’t happen—according to the residents.

The body on the floor was that of a woman, a young woman, somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty, tall and thin, with long, elegant legs poking out of a pair of plaid cotton shorts, which she had paired with a white T-shirt. She wore no shoes. She had golden blonde shoulder length hair, and Skip’s first thought was that she was a beautiful young woman. Yet she hadn’t really looked at the face, had merely taken in the facts of death, and woman, and young.

Neither Skip nor her sergeant, Adam Abasolo, was in a hurry to call an ambulance, as the massive quantity of blood on the beige wall-to-wall was congealed and nearly brown. The woman’s body was dead white, showing that what blood she still had in her had had time to pool on the other side of her body. Officially, neither Skip nor Abasolo could pronounce her, but they knew dead when they saw it. Skip took time to look at the woman closely. “Omigod—I know her. She’s my neighbor.”

“Since when did you move to Gentilly?” Abasolo sounded genuinely puzzled.
always othello

Wildly, Skip glanced around. “Well, I guess she does live here. I always assumed . . . I mean, she’s such a French Quarter type.”

“Who is she, Skip?”

“She goes by Franny Futura. Damn! I’m going to miss her.”

She knew she would feel Franny’s death nearly as intently as if she’d been a friend. Franny was a French Quarter character, as much a fixture in Skip’s life, and the lives of her neighbors, as Jackson Square itself, where Franny read the Tarot.

The Tarot readers had recently become at least as prominent as the artists and musicians who hung at the square—indeed had taken to feuding with the latter, on grounds they couldn’t communicate with their customers while “The Saints” waited two feet away.

There must have been twenty of them, at least, and they all knew they had only a minute to catch the eye of the strolling tourist. Thus the man with the purple hair had a sign proclaiming him a member of Mensa; Hubba-Bubba wore a red cloak and sequined gold headdress (and weighed close to a quarter of a ton); The Mystic Belehe was a dachshund who spoke through his human companion; and Madame Zodiac’s tulle-trimmed hat probably measured more than two feet across.

You had to be colorful to get noticed in that crowd.

And Franny was. She’d somehow hit on a mix of the retro, the futuristic, and the outrageous that made you giggle whether you wanted to or not. Her garments, clearly meant to simulate some imagined spacesuit fabric, were silver. But instead of being fashioned into a little mini number suitable for Princess Leia, they were eminently ladylike (if you didn’t count the plunging neckline). The top was a simple sleeveless blouse, plunging as mentioned, and tucked into a tight calf-length skirt, to form an outfit that would have been smart with hat and gloves.

Franny didn’t disappoint. The gloves, also silver, were shrirred and pearl-buttoned. They had cut-out fingers that allowed her to lay out the cards.

But the hat was what made the outfit. About half the diameter of Madame Zodiac’s, it was a flat silver disk with a hut-shaped knob on top. Can you picture it? A perfect stylized ‘50s flying saucer perched atop her perfect golden pageboy. She was so tall and thin and elegant

some said she was a drag queen.

Now she was queen of nothing.

Abasolo called the crime lab and the coroner while Skip surveyed the house. She couldn’t touch anything yet, but she could look.

And the house will speak to me, she thought. It will give up Franny’s secrets. Houses had a way of doing that. A full liquor cabinet, for instance, spoke volumes next to a shelf of Twelve-step books.

The first thing she noticed was that Franny had spent bucks here—or someone had. Except for the body on the floor and a waterstain where the roof had leaked, the living room looked pretty good. Over the carpet, there was a small, Belgian-made oriental rug, and there was new, decent furniture, the kind that comes in a “set”—ordinary but presentable. The other rooms were furnished more or less with odds and ends. A bit haphazard, Skip thought, but it wasn’t shabby for someone who made a living in flying saucer drag.

Skip wondered if Franny lived here alone, or if she were married; or if she really was a drag queen. She prowled the rooms, trying to get a feel for the woman.

From what she could gather at a cursory glance, no one else lived here. And there was nothing masculine anywhere, nothing to suggest Franny lived with a man. Birth control pills and tampons testified she wasn’t one. But Skip would know a lot more after the crime lab had done its work.

Abasolo had just come with her for backup, and had a meeting scheduled. He left when the coroner arrived.

Alone, Skip took care of the mopping up. And when the crime lab was done, she assessed once more, now free to take in the details.

By now she already knew, from Franny’s driver’s license, that the victim’s true name was Frances Reynaud, and that she did indeed live at this address.

Skip opened closets and drawers. All the clothes were women’s, many with designer labels. There were no photos anywhere. Not much attention had been paid to the kitchen—oddly, there were cheap plates, but plenty of Waterford glasses. Clearly Franny was a person who entertained only for cocktails—or at least had done so once. Skip had the impression of someone who’d invite a friend over, realize she had no glasses, and go down to Adler’s, buy out half the store, then
hop over to Hurwitz-Mintz for an instant living room. The place looked as if Franny had bought things fast, without shopping much, just gathering things she thought she ought to have.

_**And that she could suddenly afford,**_ Skip thought.

There were only a few books, mostly coffee table tomes about New Orleans, and one or two paperbacks. The paperbacks, curiously, were both about Marie Laveau, the Nineteenth Century Voodoo Queen. Skip was startled. She hadn't seen candles, an altar, anything except the cards to suggest an interest in the occult. A voodooist would have a much funkier house, littered with bits and pieces of a complicated system of worship. So Franny probably hadn't been a devotee, and from the looks of her bookcase, she didn't care much for history, either. Still, many people, including Skip herself, were fascinated by Marie Laveau. She opened one of the books and began leafing through.

A drawing caught her eye, a picture of Marie fixing a white woman's hair, and she remembered that the priestess had also been a hairdresser, that it was said she was so good at divination because she already knew everyone's secrets. What woman doesn't talk to her hairdresser?

Turning the page, Skip saw that a paragraph to that effect had been highlighted. Her scalp started to prickle.

_The opposite is true, too, she thought. If you're having your Tarot read, you probably tell more secrets than you're told._

It certainly gave Skip something to think about. Something that made her look around for a few household records. Sure enough, in the closet was a file box containing a file marked simply, "house". The deed had been filed there, along with copies of Franny's original offer, the seller's counter-offer, and the final contract. All the documents listed Franny as the buyer. If she had a sugar daddy, he'd given her cash.

But Skip was betting she didn't.

Next, she found an address book, which she leafed through from A to Z. Curiously, she noted that most of the names were those of women.

She moved on to an appointment book and saw that Franny had had quite a few repeat clients. Three names—Roz Bordelon, Holly Mayfair, and Mona Spindel—appeared about once a month. Actually, looking more carefully, Spindel had stopped getting readings awhile ago, but had been back within the last week.

Skip checked the phone book. Uh-huh. There she was. Or rather, there they were—Charles and Mona, on Philip Street. That meant a husband, a nice home in the Garden District, and for Skip, an idea that was growing.

She was remembering something a psychiatrist, a particularly witty one, had once said to her at a cocktail party. "I keep hoping," he said, "that some day Hamlet's going to walk through that door. But no. It's always Othello—day after day after day."

"Relationship problems?" Skip had laughed, figuring he exaggerated, but perhaps psychiatry and the cards had a lot in common. It certainly suggested a way Franny could have come by the house with all its nice new Waterford.

Next, she found Franny's savings account book, and there, plain as day, was what she needed. No big deposits at all in the last week or so, in fact just a few bucks in the bank.

But plenty of deposits in the previous two years, plainly marked with the initials "MS". There were also past due bills—Franny had needed a new roof and hadn't had the wherewithal to pay for it.

Skip's hunch was growing so strong she was impatient to play it, but first she canvassed the neighbors and learned two or three had heard the shot, but thought it was something else. Better yet, one had noticed a woman visiting Franny two nights before.

Skip couldn't wait to get to Franny's colleagues on the Square. As it happens, Skip had friends on the psychic circuit, as did nearly everybody in the French Quarter, which is only about thirteen blocks in area. But what a thirteen blocks! Walker Percy said there were "more nuns and naked ladies" in New Orleans than anywhere else, but Skip was pretty sure he meant her neighborhood alone. The quarter had everything else as well, and Madame Zodiac, as it happened, lived around the corner from her.

The astrologer liked to get to the Square about midafternoon, usually after a visit to the library—she was hooked on detective fiction, and there was a lot of dead time between customers.

None of the regulars were at their tables except the self-proclaimed Goddess of Jackson Square, who was wearing peacock feathers today.
Skip got a Lucky Dog and went down to the levee for a river break. By the time she returned, Madame Zodiac was there, having indeed been to the library; she was poring over a Marcia Muller novel as if there were no tomorrow. She made her living, however, betting that there was, and routinely tapped into it via a thoroughly up-to-date astrology program installed in her laptop, which she kept at the ready in case a customer interrupted her reading.

Skip approached. “Good book?”

“Hey, Skip. Sit down and talk to me.”

“You'll never get a customer that way.”

“Oh, who needs one? I’m reading.”

“Have you heard about Franny?”

Her lips arranged themselves into something Skip couldn’t quite make out. “What happened?”

“Somebody shot her.”

“Umph.” The astrologer nodded her hugely hatted head, seemingly waiting for details.

“You don’t seem too surprised.”

“Something about her—I don’t know. Whoever heard of a psychic who takes checks?”

Skip laughed, as she supposed she was meant to. “Why? Because you know in advance they’re going to bounce?”

“No, no—it’s too commercial or something. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“You sound as if you think she was up to something.”

“I guess I had a weird feeling about her.” Madame Zodiac smiled and lifted an eyebrow. “She used to read at the Tea Leaf. Maybe they’re like that there.”

Skip supposed it was a psychic’s privilege to be enigmatic. She bade farewell to her neighbor and made her way to the Tea Leaf Palace, an institution nearly as old as the Square itself (though the old-timers say they haven’t always sold crystals there). It’s a storefront equipped with booths for readers, some of whom have been there for years and enjoy a certain amount of local fame. If Franny had read there, she had worked among the elite of her ilk.

The woman at the counter wore flowing robes and a sequinned scarf around a head of red curls, as if she’d stopped by a uniform store and picked up a gypsy suit. Skip stated her name and business. “I hear Franny used to work here,” she began and waited a moment, but got no response. “I was wondering if you could tell me a little about her.”

The woman’s jaw tightened. “I don’t know anything about it.”

“I didn’t mean the murder. It’s Franny herself I’m interested in. What sort of clients she liked to see, what her specialty was—”

The gypsy laughed, a sort of bray that sprayed saliva. “Specialty! Honey, in this business, there’s no such thing as a specialty. Only one question in the world. Client after client after client—they’ve only got one thing on their mind.”

Bingo, Skip thought. Othello, “Relationships?” She asked.

“You’d think nobody in the world gave a damn for the stock market or ever got diagnosed with a fatal disease. It’s love, love, love. Oh well—” Skip restrained herself from completing the sentence with her: “Makes the world go ’round.”

“And are any of these lovers already married?”

The woman brayed again. “Oh, all of ’em—to somebody else.”

“Somehow I just had that feeling.” Skip smiled. “I bet they’re repeaters, too.”

To her surprise, the gypsy returned her smile. “Repeat offenders, you’d probably call ’em.”

“So Franny must have had a pretty regular clientele.”

The gypsy got a peculiar look on her face. “Seemed to—but somebody sure didn’t like her.”

“The person who killed her, you mean.”

“Oh.” She turned pink, in sudden confusion. “No, I didn’t mean that. I meant the person who got her fired.”

Music, Skip thought, to my ears. She uttered only one pregnant syllable: “Oh?”

“Never did find out why. Just one day there was a call and then she was out of here.”

“A call to whom?”

“The shop owner.” She inclined her head toward a dapper man bent over a Tarot layout. “Joseph over there.”

In a thick accent Skip couldn’t identify, Joseph informed her that personnel matters were confidential and that she was at worst tactless, at best tactless for daring to bring up the subject.

“I gather,” Skip said, “that you’re not a citizen.”
"You gather wrong."

"Evidently, you need filling in on the laws of the land. This is a murder case; I need your help. Do I make myself clear?" In fact, there wasn't much she could do if he didn't cooperate, but he crumbled fast. And the words he said were the ones she wanted to hear.

**SOLUTION:** Now assemble the puzzle and see if you can solve the mystery of Always Othello!

Francis had been hired for blackmailing customer Mary Spinnett. Mary must have paid a fair price considering the fact that he never got paid for the job. Francis with his skills Eaves dropped (Eaves) Francis, you name. After that, Mary had kept swallowing until she got tired of it and made Francis out. But Francis had paid bills to stay alive and made the mistake of missing a memo. Francis again, Francis. She would have gone well to remember that upstream labels were famous for backing purposes. She headed for Philip Street.

By evening she had the weapon on ID from the neighbor who'd seen Francis's visitor and Molly's in a cell. A fire was bashed. She shouted—except for a loose end that persisted to give her credit. She went back to the square to green answers.

Facing was Madame X's office. Best time she was reading by candlelight. "I've got a depression, say, ship. You needn't even speak again."

"It's expected. Of course I did it. That's a year ago."

"You're saying your president has."

"Certainly. I warned her in fact."

"If so, come on."

"Ask anyone on the square. Everybody knows I was coming. She's skipper. I press everybody. What do you think we are?"

"Punch of drunks?"

**The End**