

Second Fiddle

A J.P. Beaumont story

J.A. Jance

FIRST APPEARANCE: Dismissed with Prejudice, 1989

Detective J. P. Beaumont of the Seattle Police has now appeared in more than ten novels. The books are widely read and well reviewed and, along with her Joanna Brady novels, give J. A. Jance two extremely successful series, which is twice as many as most people have.

However, J.P.'s short-story appearances have been few. We are presenting this one here for the first time in a mass-market publication. For all intents and purposes it is an original story, but in point of fact it appeared in the Bouchercon 26 program when Bouchercon was held in Nottingham, England, in 1995. The story appeared for no pay, and was distributed only to those who attended the convention. It will now reach the much larger audience it deserves.

As a homicide detective, I've always viewed myself as something of a white knight riding off to defend truth, justice, and the American way, although sometimes the results on that score are less than satisfactory. And though I've been called to hundreds of crime scenes over the years, it isn't often the murder victim turns out to be someone I know.

Both those circumstances came together in one case when I was called to a late-January homicide along with my partner, Sue Danielson. The victim had been found in a vacant lot next to the railroad tracks in a neighborhood called Georgetown – a mostly industrial area directly south of downtown Seattle.

The victim lay on her back, pale blue eyes reflecting back the cold winter sky. I recognized her the moment I saw her slack, upturned face. "Erica," I said.

"Erica?" Sue echoed. "You know her?"

I nodded. "She goes to one of my AA meetings."

Sue looked down again at the corpse – a white middle-aged female, with an ugly bloodstain in the middle of her left breast. Despite the cold, she was dressed only in a long-sleeved flannel shirt and worn jeans – not the fashionably-worn kind people buy from speciality boutiques. This woman's jeans had become frayed the old-fashioned way – by long wear. The same held true for her shoes – shabby Nikes with most of the tread rubbed off the soles.

A small-caliber handgun lay just beyond the fingertips of her outstretched right hand. The mangled palm of the left one struck me as a classic defensive wound. When faced with a pointed gun, victims instinctively hold up a hand in hopes of deflecting the bullet. It hadn't worked, of course. The amount

of blood that had flowed from both wounds told us the woman hadn't died right away. My guess was that she had bled to death.

"Erica what?" sue asked.

Outsiders must think the words "Alcoholics Anonymous" constitute some kind of gimmick. But the use of the word anonymous is not an empty figure of speech. What makes it possible for an ex-boozer like me to spill my guts in front of roomfuls of strangers week after week is the fact that none of those people know my name, and I don't know theirs. Don't ask me why it helps, but it does.

"Just Erica," I said. "She claimed she'd been sober for two years."

"And dead four days minimum, Detective Beaumont," Doc Baker added, walking up behind us. Startled, I turned toward the King County medical examiner. Baker seldom shows up at ordinary crime scenes these days.

Noting my surprise, he brushed it off. "It's always a good idea for the head honcho to keep his hand in. Better for morale. I was just leaving a meeting down at Boeing Field when the call came in. I've already taken a look. Bet you lunch at Vito's that my time-of-death estimate isn't off by twelve hours in either direction."

Doc Baker always tries to sucker the newer guys. "Don't bet him," I advised Sue. "You'll lose."

The M.E. gave Sue Danielson an appraising once-over. "Maybe not," he said. "Not with new guys who look as good as she does."

At sixty-two and nearing retirement, King County's medical examiner is an unreconstructed male chauvinist pig. He still thinks Bobby Riggs should have, to quote him "whipped Billie Jean King's ass." Vaccinated against the rising epidemic of political correctness, Baker displays an engraved brass plaque on his desk: YOU CAN'T TEACH AN OLD DOC NEW TRICKS. As far as the M.E. is concerned, that says it all.

A less self-possessed woman might have taken offense. Sue handled Baker's leer by ignoring it. "What do you think we've got?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Looks self-inflicted to me. No sign of struggle. Lots of blood, so it took a while for her to die."

I looked down at the immediate area surrounding the corpse. Seattle was having one of those rare patches of cold, late-winter sun with no rain for over a week. Without cloud cover, nighttime temperatures had plummeted into the upper teens. The frozen earth around the body was littered with trash and punctuated by patches of winter-dry weeds, but no nearby plant stalks showed evidence of having been recently broken, nor could I see any lingering signs of footprints.

"Her name's Erica, by the way," I told Doc Baker. "An acquaintance of mine."

"Last name?" he asked.

"Sorry," I said. "No idea."

"Typical," Doc Baker grouched.

The crime-scene investigation team showed up then, along with the police photographer. We spent the next bone-chilling hour scouring the area, looking for evidence. When attendants from the M.E.'s office came to retrieve the body, Sue and I retreated to our car to thaw out our hands. The attendants were loading the corpse onto a gurney when Baker came rumbling across the lot, marching toward us like a fast-moving thundercloud. His shock of white hair stood on end. His face was red, his forehead creased by a dangerous frown.

"Oops," I said to Sue. "This looks like trouble." And it was.

"I thought you said her name was Erica," he growled accusingly when Sue and I stepped out to meet him.

"That's the name I know her by," I countered.

"Well, we found this in her hip pocket." He held up something that looked like a credit card. "Says here her name's Georgina Elisa Carver."

The rectangular piece of plastic he handed me was an official, state-issued photo identification card -- the kind nondrivers can obtain from the department of motor vehicles in lieu of a driver's license. It offers the cachet of an official ID for people who, for one reason or another, don't drive. Looking down I saw a photo of the woman I had known as Erica smiling back at me over the name Georgina Elisa Carver. The card listed a Bellevue address.

After examining the card, I passed it along to Sue. "Wait a minute," she said. "I remember this name from yesterday's briefing. It was unusual enough that it stuck in my head. Wasn't she listed as a missing person?"

As soon as Sue jogged my memory, I knew she was right. It took only a matter of moments for Sue to keyboard the victim's name into our new, in-vehicle laptop. Seconds later we had our answer. Georgina Carver had, indeed, been reported missing Sunday evening by her sister, Gail Mathers. When Georgina had left home on Saturday and didn't return that night, Gail had worried. Georgina still wasn't home by Sunday evening. That's when Gail had called the police. The M.P. report listed both a work and a home number. The address listed matched the one on Georgina Carver's ID.

"Off to Bellevue, then?" Sue asked me.

"Sounds like," I told her.

Bellevue, a suburb Seattleites used to denigrate as nothing but a "well-to-do bedroom community," is now a major city in its own right, complete with a fairly respectable skyline of high-rises. It's touted as being a relatively crime-free haven of rich Republicans, but in recent years Seattle street gangs have joined more traditional commuters in going back and forth across Lake Washington on the I-90 bridge. Which means that Bellevue isn't nearly as crime- and drug-free as it used to be.

"Let's go," I said. "You drive. I'll navigate."

Because it was a weekday morning, we decided to track down the work number first. That led us to a place called Tye Middle School. Sue's inquiry about Gail Mathers provoked both a broad smile and a shake of the head from the school secretary.

"I'm afraid Ms. Mathers doesn't work here anymore."

"But she did as late as last week," Sue objected.

"That's right," the secretary answered. "But she called in on Monday morning and said she wouldn't be in for the rest of her life. She won the Lotto jackpot Saturday night. Seven million dollars' worth. With that much money, why would anyone want to keep teaching seventh-grade math?"

Sue, who has her own junior-high-school-age son named Jared to contend with, glanced at me. "Why indeed?" she said.

We headed off to track down Gail Mathers's home address.

"You hear a lot of stories in AA meetings," I told Sue as we climbed back into the car. "After a while they all start to blend together, so I may have my wires crossed. But I seem to remember Erica saying that she had been in prison at some point and that she was writing a book about the experience."

Sue frowned thoughtfully. "If Georgina went to prison for an alcohol-related offense, that might explain why she had an ID card in place of a driver's license."

While Sue drove, I checked with Records. Georgina Elisa Carver had done fifteen months at Purdy for vehicular homicide and driving under the influence.

"That was a pretty good guess," I told Sue with a grin. "Ever think of trying your hand at being a detective?"

"I'll take it under consideration," she returned.

Gail Mathers's house was a modest one on a wooded hillside east of Bellevue Way. The woman who answered the door looked enough like Erica that they might have been twins. She peered out at us anxiously from behind a partially opened door.

"Gail Mathers?" I asked, showing her my ID and badge.

"Yes."

"I'm Detective J.P. Beaumont. This is my partner, Detective Sue Danielson."

"Is this about Georgina? Did you find her?"

"I'm afraid so," I answered. "Although we don't yet have a positive identification."

Gail Mathers blanched, clutching at the doorknob for support. "Is she dead?"

"Please, Ms. Mathers. It would be better if we didn't discuss this here on the porch. Do you mind if we come in?"

Gail turned and fled sobbing across the room, leaving us to find our own way. The living room was clean but cluttered, filled with more than enough yellow and orange plaid, colonial-style furniture to fill two large living rooms rather than a single small one. Gail threw herself down on a couch and huddled there weeping. Taking turns, Sue and I briefed her on the situation.

"How can this be?" Gail Mathers wailed as we finished. "Just when things were starting to get better – for her; for both of us. How can Georgie be dead now? When did this happen? Where?"

"In a vacant lot south of downtown Seattle," I explained. "We won't know when until after the autopsy. We'll need you to come downtown as soon as possible to give us a positive ID."

"What do you mean about things getting better?" Sue asked. "The jackpot?"

Gail nodded. "Things have been awful for Georgie for years now, ever since the accident. First Hal died – Hal was Georgie's husband, you see. He was thrown from the car when it slammed into a tree. She was driving. Hal lingered in intensive care for weeks before he died. Then there was the trial. When that was over, they shipped Georgie off to prison, even though she'd paid a fortune for that quack of an attorney. She spent every last dime she had, but she went to prison anyway. Then, while she was locked up, our mother died of Alzheimer's.

"I think Mother's death was the last straw. When Georgie came home from prison, she was different somehow – all closed up. There were times she told me she couldn't see any reason to go on living. That's understandable. She had lost her life's work. She couldn't go back to being a psychologist. No one would have her. People told me that sometimes they'd see her in downtown Seattle, holding one of those 'Will Work for Food' signs. That was a scam, of course. She always had food to eat and roof over her head here with me.

"I kept hoping that if I was patient, eventually she'd pull out of it. My birthday was last Thursday. It broke my heart when the day came and went with no acknowledgement whatsoever. I thought she had forgotten it completely. Not that I wanted much. Money's tight for her. A card would have been plenty. Then, Sunday morning, I found this out in the kitchen inside the coffee canister."

Gail took a basket off the coffee table and thumbed through a number of cards before retrieving one and handing it over to me. The card was a small but flowery one, the verse on the outside simple. "In an uncertain world, sisters are forever." Inside it said, "Thanks for being mine." It was signed, "Love, Georgie."

"There was a Lotto ticket for that week's game tucked inside the card," Gail continued. "I went right to the Sunday paper and checked the numbers. When I realized we'd won, I couldn't believe it. I went racing down the hall screaming like a banshee. 'We won! We won!' And I did mean we, because I would have shared the jackpot with Georgie. But she wasn't there. Her bed hadn't been slept in. I waited all day Sunday on needles and pins. I could hardly stand not being able to tell her right away.

“It meant we’d both finally be able to do the things we’d dreamed of doing – like buying nice clothes and traveling. I’ve always wanted to go to New York and to see something live on Broadway. And Georgie always dreamed of visiting the British Museum. When she still wasn’t home Sunday night, I called nine-one-one to report her missing.

“The officer was very nice, but he said the police would have to wait a full twenty-four hours before they could do anything. He asked me if Georgie had a problem with drugs or alcohol. When I told him she used to drink, he said maybe she’d fallen off the wagon and gone on a bender. After thinking about it a while, I decided maybe he was right. So Monday I took the day off and went down to Olympia to pick up our first check. Since Georgie wasn’t there, I had them make the whole thing out to me.

“I spent all day yesterday resigning from the school district and making arrangements to put the money in the bank. Handling that much money is really complicated, you know. I wanted Georgie with me when I made all those decisions and transactions. She’s always been smart about things like that, even when she was drinking.”

“I met your sister a time or two,” I said. “She called herself Erica instead of Georgie. Do you have any idea why she might have done that?”

A frown flitted across Gail’s somber face. “When we were little we used to pretend we were someone else. I was always Suzanne – I liked that name better than plain old Gail. And Georgie always picked Erica. It drove our mother crazy. We’d go for days at a time without breaking character. It was like a contest to see which of us could outlast the other.”

“And she claimed to be working on a book,” I added. “Do you know about that?”

“Georgie, writing a book?” Gail asked. “You must be mistaken. If she had been, I certainly would have known about it.”

“And you didn’t?”

“No. Where would she have done it? When?”

“Maybe in her room,” Sue suggested quietly. “Is it possible for us to see it?”

Gail rose to her feet. “Of course,” she said. “This way.”

We made our way through the cluttered house. It wasn’t messy so much as overstuffed. The dining room held two full-size dining tables and a jumbled collection of stacked chairs. The family room held two television sets and two pianos – an enormous old upright and a smaller, more modern spinet.

“Half of these are Mother’s things,” Gail explained as we threaded our way down the hall. “I didn’t want to get rid of anything without Georgie’s approval. While she was in prison I couldn’t consult her. And now that she’s out, she’s...” Gail lapsed into silence, finally adding lamely, “... she hasn’t shown any interest.”

Compared to the rest of the house, Georgina Carver’s bedroom was monklike in its spare simplicity. There was a single, well-made bed under the window, a chest of drawers, and a small desk with a

straight-backed chair pushed under it. Nothing was out of place except for a single piece of paper lying on the desk.

Meandering over to the desk, I glanced down. One of the few benefits of encroaching middle age is an increasing ability to read things at a distance. That may be bad for reading newspapers and books, but it's good for reading papers off tables without having to pick them up.

In this case, I was looking at the monthly newsletter from something called the Washington Center for the Book, at the Seattle public library.

"What's this?" I asked.

Gail shrugged. "Georgie's mail. It came this morning. She went downtown on the bus almost every day. I always wondered where she went and what she did down there. Maybe she spent her time at the library."

And at AA meetings, I thought.

"What about your sister's friends?" I asked. "Did you know any of them?"

Gail shook her head. "Georgie and I were worlds apart when it came to that. I didn't approve of hers, and she certainly didn't like mine."

"So you didn't necessarily chum around much," Sue offered. Gail nodded. "But were you and your sister friends?" Sue pressed.

An anguished look flashed across Gail Mathers's face. "Not really. You know how it is."

"How what is?"

"Georgie always thought Mother liked me best; that she always played second fiddle to me. She shouldn't have been jealous. Georgie was always smarter than I was. And prettier."

And deader, I thought, edging around the worrisome hunch that was beginning to grow in my gut. "Do you happen to keep any weapons here in the house?" I asked.

"Only a twenty-two. For protection," Gail Mathers added. "I bought it last year. Georgie thought that two women living alone ought to have some kind of weapon, but she couldn't buy it in her own name. Not with her record."

"Could we see it, please?" Sue asked.

"Sure," Gail said easily. "It's in the nightstand in my bedroom."

But, of course, it wasn't there. Gail made a show of searching for it but finally gave up. "Maybe we ought to go down to the medical examiner's office now," I suggested.

"I'll get my car keys," Gail said.

"Don't bother. We'll drive you downtown and bring you home afterward," I said.

Sue and I waited outside by our car while Gail closed up the house and switched on the alarm. "Seven million dollars," Sue mused thoughtfully. "What if that Lotto ticket never turned up in a birthday card? What if it really belonged to Georgina and Gail stole it? You combine that much money with a years-old sibling squabble, and what do you have?"

"A female Cain and Abel?" I offered.

Sue nodded. "The thought had crossed my mind," she said.

"So far, that's strictly speculation."

Sue Danielson's face was grim. "My guess is it won't stay that way long."

The trip to the morgue was like countless other awful victim-identification trips. The moment the lab tech whipped the sheet off Georgina Carver's pallid face, Gail Mathers fainted dead away. She was still quivering and semihysterical when we dropped her back to the house in Bellevue. Sue and I offered to stay until a friend or family member could arrive, but she wouldn't hear of it.

That was just as well. I was anxious for us to head downtown. "What's the hurry?" Sue asked.

"Let's hit the Seattle public library," I told her. "We'll check out the Washington Center for the Book."

"What does that have to do with the price of peanuts?"

"If Georgina Carver went downtown every day, if she hung out there without any kind of job, she must have been doing something. The library seems like as good a place to start as any. If nothing else, we know she's on their mailing list -- under her real name."

"Oh," Sue said.

At the library it was only a matter of minutes before we were directed into the office Nancy Pearl, the executive director for the Washington Center for the Book. I gave the preliminaries short shrift before plunging into the pertinent questions.

"Do you know someone named Georgina Carver?" I asked.

"Of course," Nancy answered directly. She doesn't go by that name here. We've all been asked to call her Erica. She's using one of our carrels this time around."

"Carrels?"

"Desks," Nancy Pearl explained. "So many would-be writers are stymied by the lack of a decent place to work. They can apply to use one of our workspaces in the C.K. Poefratt Writers' Room for up to as long as a year at a time. We provide a warm, well-lighted quiet place in which to work, along with a locker for storage so they don't have to carry things back and forth. For the time period of their grant, our mostly not-yet-published writers can work here as much or as little as they like."

Nancy Pearl paused for a moment and studied me with a puzzled frown. "But why are you asking me about Georgina ... about Erica, I mean?"

"She's dead," I said. "We found her body this morning."

Nancy didn't seem surprised. She leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and shook her head. "Erica was so frightened that would happen. And it did, no matter how hard she tried to prevent it."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"It's the sister, of course," Nancy answered briskly. "Erica showed me some of the passages from her diary. She was culling entries and editing them into a book. She told me on more than one occasion how afraid she was of her sister, the teacher. What's her name?"

"Mathers, Gail Mathers."

"Right. That's the one. Erica told me that if anything ever happened to her, I should tell the detectives to check on Gail, that she wasn't to be trusted."

"Did Georgina say why?"

"She said her sister always hated her, something about their mother. Georgina and I had lunch together several times, the last time just days ago. She seemed desperately frightened – literally afraid for her life. She told me that shortly before Christmas Gail bought herself a gun."

Sue Danielson and I exchanged glances. "Do you have any idea what kind?"

"She didn't say, and it wouldn't have made any difference if she had. I don't know anything at all about guns."

"Going back to the project she was working on. You say she kept a diary?"

Gail nodded. "I'd call it more of a journal. I believe she started it while she was incarcerated. It must have been very painful. There was an accident, you see, several years ago on New Year's Eve. Georgina was driving when her husband was killed. She served time in prison, lost her job, everything. I think writing the book was her way of driving out the demons, of trying to make sense of it all."

"Is there any way for you to open her locker?" Sue asked.

"Not without a court order," Nancy responded. "Confidentiality, you know."

She said it so firmly that we didn't even bother trying to change her mind. Getting a court order took several hours. When we finally had one, Nancy led us into the wood-paneled, carpeted room. Several of the desks were occupied by people who looked up at us, frowning at the interruption.

The locker, when Nancy opened it, was as spare and uncluttered as Georgina Carver's bedroom. There were four spiral notebooks and a Ziploc bag full of lottery receipts, twenty-six separate tickets in all. At two games per week, that meant thirteen weeks of Lotto games in which Georgina had played the same two sets of identical numbers over and over. Only the receipt for that last Saturday's game – the winning ticket – was missing.

Exchanging the contents of the locker for a receipt, Sue and I headed out the door. The library is only a few blocks from the department, but I didn't want to go there. Not right away.

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked Sue. "Shouldn't we stop off for a bite to eat before we head back?"

"I'm starved," she agreed with a knowing smile.

Over a meal that was too late for lunch and too early for dinner, we skimmed through the first few notebooks and devoured the last one. The story was there in painstakingly unflinching detail – from the grim entries relating Hal Carver's appalling injuries to Georgina's terror at the idea of Gail being armed with a gun.

One passage, written in early January, hit me especially hard. "I've talked to N.P.," Georgina wrote, referring presumably to Nancy Pearl. "She says just because Gail and I are sisters doesn't mean it isn't domestic violence. N.P. thinks I should move out or go to the police. If I left, where would I go? And if I went to the cops, who would they believe? The nice lady schoolteacher, or the ex-con straight out of the slammer?"

I passed the notebook across to Sue and waited while she read it. "What do you think?" I asked.

"I think it's time to talk to Captain Powell."

It was several days before we had the autopsy results back and enough probable cause to return to Bellevue. The next time Sue and I showed up on Gail Mathers's doorstep, we came armed with a search warrant and accompanied by officers from the Bellevue Police Department. At first, while we conducted the search, Gail sat quietly watching the process and acting as though she had no idea why we were there. Sue was the one who found the jacket in the front hall closet – a leather jacket with what looked like powder burns on the front and sleeves.

When we started reading Gail her rights and placing her under arrest, she went ballistic. It took all four of us – Sue and me and the two Bellevue cops as well – to restrain her.

The case came together quickly after that. Gail Mathers's arrest was followed in short order by a grand jury indictment, a preliminary hearing, and eventually a trial. All the while Gail loudly proclaimed her innocence. The prosecutors didn't believe her. The jury didn't, either.

Admittedly, most of the evidence was circumstantial. There was no eyewitness who saw the murder go down, but the powder burns on the jacket found in the closet did connect Gail Mathers with firing the fatal weapon. Entries from Georgina's diary were allowed into evidence. As the prosecutor read the agonizing passages that spelled out the victim's fear of death at her sister's hands, the words fell upon a hushed courtroom with the undeniable weight of fulfilled prophecy.

Gail Mathers was convicted and sentenced to twenty years to life for first-degree murder. Before corrections officers moved her out of the King County jail, she asked to see me.

"You know Georgie staged her own suicide as murder just to set me up, don't you?" she asked. "The Lotto jackpot made it that much easier for her to win."

"Win!" I objected. "What do you mean, win? The woman is dead."

"My sister was a pathological liar," Gail replied calmly. "She must have worked on this scheme for months, maybe even years. She'd go to any lengths to get even, and look what's happened. My teaching career is over. The jackpot money's gone, as far as I'm concerned. The IRS claims I lied about Georgie giving me the ticket. That will make the entire jackpot flow through Georgina's estate. The feds want the estate taxes, and they want them now. Georgina's will named me as primary heir and the Seattle Public Library as contingent beneficiary. Since I've been convicted of her death, everything that doesn't go for taxes will go to the library. Instead of being a millionaire, I'm a pauper. It'll take everything I own to pay my lawyer."

"Would Georgina be that diabolical?" I asked. "Why would she go to that much trouble?"

"Because she hated me," Gail answered simply.

"Oh, please. Don't give me that old line about your mother liking you best."

"No, because Georgina held me responsible for Hal's death."

That one stunned me. "How could that be? She was the one driving the car."

"Did you read the notebooks?" Gail asked. "Her diaries?"

"Sure, but..."

"Did she ever say where the party was held that New Year's Eve?"

"No."

"I'll tell you where it was, Detective Beaumont. At *my* house. Georgina and Hal both got drunk drinking *my* booze at *my* party. It's taken this long for her to get back at me, but that's all right. I can be a graceful loser."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm not going to appeal my conviction. Why bother? I don't have any money left or a job or even a house to live in. This way I might not get to travel, but I'll have food to eat and a roof over my head. I'm looking forward to twenty years of reading books without having to put up with other people's rotten kids. But you're wrong about one thing."

"What's that?"

"Mother always did like me best."

I left the jail feeling odd, as though I had been sucked into a war between two crazed women, and I couldn't tell who had won or lost. Heading back home, I remembered a verse my mother told me once, although I can't remember exactly where it's from.

It needs more skill than I can tell
To play the second fiddle well.

I have a terrible feeling Georgina Carver played one hell of a second fiddle.