



IT TAKES FOUR TO TANGLE¹

Anonymous
by Edward D. Wood, Jr.

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The first girl the secretarial agency sent over turned out to be the girl of my dreams. Auburn hair brushed smooth and flipped back behind one ear. Alert blue eyes, spackle of freckles across the nose, manner a neat blend of the devilish and demure.² But that figure! She had it buttoned into a tailored suit with some idea of looking business-like. Wasted effort. The jacket bulged at the bosom, nipped in to a tiny waist and flared suggestively at the hips. The skirt, despite a front pleat, rode over rounded knees when she sat down. Paula Trent,³ you're hired, honey, and never mind the references!

Outwardly I observed the formalities. Introduced myself as Les Murdoch and added that my partner, Vic Banta, was out of town bidding on a new development job. Had the nature of our business been explained to her? Fine, fine.

"And now Miss Trent, may I ask why you wish to leave your present place of employment?"

"Certainly." Her smile was clear and candid. "I don't like being lost in a typists' pool. I'd prefer a one-girl office where I can use all my skills and training."

Lady, you've come to the right place. Use 'em on me. Careful, though. This is not the kind of doll you can play grabsies with during office hours.

Briskly I continued, "Since we're just a two-man outfit bucking heavy competition, the salary will be small to start with." I named a figure. She looked slightly disappointed. I upped it ten bucks and added, "With more to come if you can take over so that I'm free to go out on inspections."

She rose, a smooth all-in-one motion with no girdle-hitch or attention to stocking seams. "Don't worry, Mr. Murdoch, I'll pay my way and then some."

She meant it. Next morning when I pulled up to the pink plaster box we call headquarters, it was already open for business. Inside it was clean, cool, the desks neatened up and coffee on.

Paula, sleeveless blouse belted into a straight skirt, was busy at the filing cabinet. After a dazzling good-morning, she said, "There's already been a call for Mr. Banta. From," she consulted her phone pad, "a Mrs. Helen Doyle."

"Oh hell, *her*," I said before I thought. And smiled feebly. "Personal. She'll call again. And again."

Paula kept her expression expressionless. "I found your coffee supplies. But I'm afraid the cream is sour."

"That's life," I said, "among us bachelors." Get it, honey? Nobody's got me yet. But you've got the best chance I've ever seen.

We had coffee together while Paula checked off some items she wanted to know about. At the end she asked, "If there are any more calls for Mr. Banta, when shall I say he'll be back?"

¹ Thin as such a note is, the syntax of this title recalls Wood's later novel, *It Takes One to Know One*. The latter phrase appears in many of Wood's novels, where it is usually used as a marker of transvestism (see at least *Suburbia Confidential* [60] and *Black Lace Drag* [57]).

² The alliteration in this passage (and in many others in this tale) seems a trademark of much of Wood's France/IPI work, featuring heavily in the many semi-fictional Wood pieces published anonymously and under the pseudonyms "Jake Lee," "Jake Lee Anderson," and "J. Lee Anderson."

³ As Wood aficionados will know, "Paula Trent" is a character name culled from prior Wood work—specifically, from the 1957 film *Grave Robbers* [*Plan 9*] *from Outer Space*, featuring the "Trents," "Jeff" and "Paula."

Too damn soon, I thought glumly, remembering Vic's way with women.

We'd met in basic training,⁴ been assigned to the same platoon and ended up barracks mates while serving our hitch. Vic wasn't as big a guy as me but he was built solid. Tops [20] with the tomatoes, too, to hear him tell it. Which figured, considering his dark good looks and go-to-hell grin. But I used to wish he'd shut up about it.

Not that I'm any gentleman. Us Murdochs come from a long line of Scotch-Irish who knew how to kick up their kilts. But from the same source I'd inherited an industrious streak. Uncle Sam was entitled to his service, but I meant to see that the time wasn't wasted. I had my own personal plan for Discharge Day, which required a certain amount of studying.

Seeing me with my nose in a book bothered Banta. He needed me constantly. And, when he failed to get a rise, grew curious.

One night he bore down on me in my bunk with his usual intent to interrupt.

"Hey, Les, up and attem. Got a crap game going in the latrine and your old buddy-pal is hot tonight. Bet on me and clean up."

"I'm going to clean up," I said, "in my own time, in my own way. So shove off."

Instead, he squatted down, knees cracking, and read off the title of my book: "*Pesticides, Insecticides and Fumigants*." White choppers showed in a delighted grin. "Man, you are buggy!"

I debated whether to let him have it, or let him in on it. Explaining seemed less trouble in the long run. "No, but southern California is. The pests' paradise. Which is the business I'm preparing for—termite control."

I waited for the big guffaw which⁵ didn't come. One thing about Banta, he was adaptable. If he'd been born during the Ice Age he'd have learned to eat the stuff and thrive on it.

Still hunkering, he asked respectfully, "Much money in it?"

"Well, every time a house is sold it has to pass termite clearance. And when you figure that the average Californian only stays in one place about three years—that kind of turn-over looks good to me."

"Uh huh." He fished out his smokes and lit up. "Would a guy meet any dolls in that racket, though?"

I shrugged. "Plenty of housewives who want their foundations inspected—"

Our eyes met and we busted out laughing. From then on he let up on me and I got to like [21] him.

Next weekend we took a pass together. Vic steered me to a beer joint in town where the babes hung out. Cushiony cuties with loud laughs, penciled eyes and bushed-out hair. Okay, if you like air mattresses. I prefer my dames to have some class. After awhile I slipped out and caught a cab to my favorite uptown bar where I called Dorothy.

Dorothy was a luscious little honey-blond with whom I had an arrangement. Being a nurse, she couldn't get away too often either. But when our weekends coincided, we made the most of them. No ties, no sighs. A few drinks, a few dances, and we'd retire to her apartment.

Our first time together, Dorothy had hung back, sensitive about nurses' reputations for being extra sexy. Just because she knew anatomy, she warned, I needn't expect the exotic. She was not. about to spray herself with gold paint and do a belly dance or anything.⁶ I told her I surely hoped not, as I would be hard put to it to follow through. Plain as apple pie myself, I liked a girl to act naturally. Nature being something I had yet to tire of.

⁴ Biographically-minded readers might be tempted to read these passages, laden with military jargon as they are, as indicative of something of Wood's World War II experience in the U.S. Marine Corps.

⁵ In later years, Wood would utilize this particular grammatical construction—the word "which" in place of the more conventional "that," employed with no preceding comma—almost as a rule. This particular usage is the first of two instances in this tale.

⁶ Wood would expand upon this idea three years later in the film *Orgy of the Dead*, with the dancing character of "Gold Girl" (played by Pat Barringer). An analog of the same character would also appear in a Pendulum pictorial novel, *The Erotic Spy*, as by "Abbott Smith" (PP-003), three years after *that*. Although this latter text may or may not have been written by Wood, it seems in any case to have been at least partially planned out by him—one would think as a product of much the same kind of session Kathleen Wood describes in which he and Pendulum publisher Bernie Bloom "sat together trying to get the first two [Pendulum pictorial] books done, *Raped in the Grass*, and *Bye Bye Broadie*" (Grey 140).

Freed of the need to put on a performance, Dorothy performed perfectly. She could be by turns docile or demanding, wildly wilful and touchingly tender. We made love not by the book, but according to the mood we were in. It was always different and always delightful.

As it was again that weekend.

I made it to the terminal Sunday just in time for the six o'clock bus back to Base. A pink-eyed Vic was waiting, teed off that I'd ducked out on him.

"What do you care?" I grinned. "You were in good hands. *Lots* of 'em."

His eyes narrowed. "Yeah, and I suppose you took in an all-night movie?"

I laughed. "That's one way of putting it."

Vic scratched his scrubby chin. "Buddy-pal, something tells me I could learn from you." [22]

After that, although we stogged around together, I took it for granted that we'd go our separate ways, girlwise.

Vic did have one talent I envied—he was money-lucky. I brought it up one morning before chow while we were shaving.

"The way you handle the cubes, you must have plenty in your kick by now?"

He grinned through lather. "Puttin' the buzz on me?"

"Yeah, for a business loan, eventually. I'll need about \$5000 to get started. At seven per cent, it's a good investment."

He shook his head. "That's my play dough. When I bust out of uniform I'm heading straight for Vegas."

I shrugged. "To each his own. Guess I'll have to apply for a GI loan."

I think he expected me to be more disappointed.

Came the happy day when we were being processed through repple depple. Almost out, but had to report back to Base in three days for our final papers.

Early Friday Vic took off with the gang for town. I stayed behind working on my loan application. Dorothy couldn't make it that night and I didn't feel like promoting anything new at this late date.

Saturday night we met in our favorite booth at our favorite bar. Dorothy was a little distant. Not sore, exactly, but feeling the coming parting like women do. What could I say? That I'd be back to marry her? I knew I wouldn't. She was a sweet kid and swell in bed, but with [23] me it just didn't go any deeper.

I was just getting her thawed out when who should show up but Banta. All spit-and-polish, on his best behavior, and ever so "surprised to run into you."

Nothing to do but buy him a drink. He sat and nursed it while his eyes nursed my nurse. It was quite a performance. He charmed her with compliments and clean jokes. At first when Dorothy played up to him, I figured it was just to punish me. But pretty soon I could feel her really responding.

Finally I excused myself and went to the can to figure how to shake him. A real stupid mistake. Because when I got back they'd flown the coop.

Well, I could've gone to her apartment and beat the door down. But, like I said, with Dorothy and me it was no ties. She had a right to change partners if she felt like it. And Banta knew how to make her feel like it.

I spent the night on a bench in the bus station and was still around when the guys started straggling in the next day. Banta arrived when we were all out on the crowded platform waiting to board.

He elbowed up and stood in front of me, wary-eyed but smiling. "Told you I learn fast."

"Yep," I said.

"No hard feelings then?"

"Nope," I said. And hauled off and hit him in the mouth.

He flung out his arms and fell back into a bunch of GI's. Who happily shoved him upright and ringed around for the fight. I hand it to Vic, he was still smiling. But more vertically than horizontally now, with that split lip. For added chuckles, I busted him in the eye.

Then somebody yelled, "Watch it! M.P.'s" and everybody melted into the bus. Leaving us a couple of candidates for the guardhouse.

But Vic acted fast. Lowering his head, he butted me onto a bench, dropped beside me, pulled his cap down over his eye, placed his head on my shoulder and started snoring.

A couple of M.P.'s charged up and stomped around, glaring. Nothing to see. Vic snored away while his lip bled gently into my shirt pocket.

Back at Base, he sat docilely on his bunk while I taped his lip and doctored his eye. Then, groaning, he bent to unlace his boots.

"Here, let me help," I offered, hating myself for being the one to feel guilty. He shook his head and I grumbled, "It's your own damn fault. Never even put up a fight—" I stopped, puzzled. Vic had pulled off a boot and was ripping out its insole. From under it he took a layer of greenbacks, mostly large denominations. Same with boot number two. When he had a lapful, he looked up at me and grinned, black eye, white lip and all.

"Here's your five grand and then some. But there's a catch." He thumbed his chest. "Me. I want in. Full partner."

"Yea, BUDDY-PAL," I cried and grabbed his hand.

It had worked out fine, Vic the old promoter dragging in new accounts while I handled reports and estimates. Until I got restless [24] under too much paperwork.

Well, now we had an office girl. But the girl was Paula Trent, which made the difference. I half wished Vic'd never come back.

He did, though, on Friday, just before quitting time. Paula was in the little lavatory in back, fixing up for our dinner date. With luck, I hoped Vic would take off and leave me one more lovely evening before I had to spring her on him.

But he was disgusted from no sale, and bound to talk about it. "Cheapjack builders," he fumed. "I tried to sell 'em on preventive control, at least spraying the subsoil before they throw up their crackerboxes. But oh no, let it turn into another Termite Terrace—"

He paused and glanced around. "Say, what've you done to the joint? Looks different." His eyes lit on a vase of flowers on my desk. And at that moment in the lavatory a tap was turned on. "Oh-oh." His look was amused and aware. "The woman's touch."

I stood up, feeling I had to make it formal and final.

"Vic, I've done a lot of chasing, same as you. But this is it. Her name is Paula Trent and she's—well, I mean, I'm hit."

He spread his palms. "So what do you need—references?"

I hadn't got it across. Who could, with Vic? To him love was just a game that any number can play. I was sunk and I knew it. Even before the door opened and my precious Paula walked in.

The next weeks were miserable, watching him move in. It was the Dorothy deal all over again, only played with more finesse. He laughed it up, joking and kidding her. And Paula paid him back in kind, like the high-spirited filly she is. Somehow our dates turned into threesomes. I got to take her home, is all.

Those goodnights parked in front of her house were the worst torture. Cuddles and kisses, when I could hardly keep from taking her. But I wanted to go easy, so she'd know I really meant it.

One night I couldn't stand it any longer. Her in my arms, round and warm and sweet ...Deep kisses that promised so much more..."Paula," I blurted, "I've got to know: Which is it, Vic or me?"

She froze. Then pulled away.

I pulled her back. "Sorry, honey. It's just that he is such a likable guy. And you two seem to get along so well together—"

"Don't apologize," she said crisply. "My fault for breaking the rules. They taught us in business school never to get mixed up with the boss. Causes trouble. *Big* trouble between partners." She paused. "Maybe I should find another job."

Well, it scared hell out of me. I was all set to ask her to marry me. Now I figured that would be rushing it. Not enough groundwork laid.

"Baby—" I took her face between my hands. "You stick around, see? Because I love you. Intentions strictly honorable. And in time I'll prove it."

Her eyes glittered oddly. "Is *time* all that's required, Les?" Then, with a sigh: "All right. We'll see."

Next day I had it out with Vic. Or tried to.

We'd just sprayed an empty house with methylbromide, locked up and posted the warning. As we climbed back into the pickup, I said, "You realize this is the first job in a week?"

Vic shrugged. "So business is slow. "It'll pick up."

"Not with you hanging around the office instead of out hustling."

He grinned. "Same to you, sweetheart."

"Dammit Vic, lay off! I'm serious about Paula."

His eyes hardened. "How do you know *I'm* not?"

I snorted. "Because there's still Mrs. Helen Doyle, divorcee and bar hostess supreme. Among others."

Vic snapped his fingers. "Hey, that reminds me. Helen's got money down on a duplex. Figures to live in one side, rent the other. And wants us to do the termite inspection."

"Wants you to."

"Man, this is *business*, like you're hollering about. And you know me—gift of gab but can't tell a bedbug from a flying ant. What say I call her for you and make the arrangements?"

"Oh hell," I said hopelessly. Again nothing [25] was settled. I'd just have to rely on having the inside track with Paula. And possibly picking up more speed.

Two days later I met with Mrs. Doyle at the duplex in the Los Feliz district. Met her for the first time and was, I admit, pleasantly surprised. Vic's taste had improved, all right. This was a sexpot of the superior sort. A statuesque brunette, silky hair slicked back in Spanish style. The chassis was cleverly contained in a black sheath that did nothing to conceal its curves. Around her shoulders was draped a fur stole, which, judging from its mousy color, must've been genuine mink. In fact, when you looked into those wise eyes, you knew it. The lady had been around and would go again if it pleased her.

For the first half hour we stuck to business. The duplex was partly furnished and looked like a fair investment. But I noticed that the floors in one unit sloped slightly.

Helen showed me how to get under the house and I crawled around, looking for trouble. Found it too, in more ways than one. Every time I glanced out, there stood a trim pair of ankles. And the pointed toe of a suede pump was tapping impatiently. I closed my eyes and thought of Paula. And how hot it was getting under there.

I crawled out, dusted myself off, and we went into one of the units to talk it over. The only furniture was a davenport, so we sat down together, Helen crossing her knees and me consulting my notes. Or trying to.

"Bad news," I said briskly. "The house has no foundation. Mud sills. Some evidence of dry rot, which usually means termites too. Besides," I pointed to a door connecting with the other unit, "it's a converted job. That means thin walls and no privacy."

"Then you don't advise me to buy?"

I looked at her. "You'd be asking for it."

She smiled. And said softly, double-meaning it, "Maybe I am. Asking for it."

That did it. The weeks of holding off with Paula, fighting Vic and worrying about the business all piled up and went ka-pow inside. Us Scots are like that. Dutiful and dependable for years on end. Then we suddenly join the Black Watch and go to war. [26]

I grabbed Mrs. Helen Doyle by the bun on the back of her neck, which came unpinned and spilled over my hand like warm water. Then her hot mouth was fastened on mine and she was snaking out of her tight sheath.

It was short, swift and savage. The kind of unpremeditated primitive passion which usually leaves both parties feeling embarrassed afterward.

Not that we had time to take stock. We had barely pulled ourselves together—in fact, I was helping Helen with her zipper—when the door connecting with the other unit whanged open. And there stood Paula. And behind her, Vic.

My stunned senses were forced to register several impressions at once. The first was, *frame-up!* Her white face showed that whatever she had come to the duplex to see, it was *not* Les Murdoch *in flagrante*. She'd been taken in, same as me. The taker was also obvious: old buddy-pal, the fast thinker who had really pulled a fast one. Mrs. Doyle didn't seem any too damned surprised either.

In fact, it was Helen who spoke first. Strangely enough, addressing Paula. "Well, young lady? If you're half the woman I hope—"

"Half?" Paula marched up and slapped her face. "I'm *twice* the woman you are. And you," turning on me, "are more of a man than I thought you were. Although why you had to prove it with *her*, when I was ready, willing and waiting—!"

"Honey," I groaned hopefully, "You mean you're not sore? You understand? And forgive me?"

"I'm furious," Paula snarled, taking my hand. "I understand that all your brains are below your belt, like any man's. And that I'll probably be forgiving you for the next fifty years."

As she dragged me to the door, I glanced back at Vic. And was pleased to note that he'd finally been put down. His face showed the shock of losing Paula—plus a look of new alarm. Because Helen was advancing on him, unzipping her zipper again, with obvious intent of taking permanent possession... □

[27]