

While the Iron is Hot

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Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine March-April 2025

Natasha Curtis thought things with her parents couldn't get any worse. She was wrong.

She pulled open the door of her childhood home that August Saturday. Nat lived an hour's drive away in Worcester and hadn't been to visit since her father's birthday in early June.

The living room of the bungalow a mile from the rocky coast north of Boston smelled like nearly scorched paper. Nat stared at her mother. At the ironing board. At the smooth ten-dollar bill off of which Anna Burtseva had just lifted a hot iron. At the crumpled dollars piled on the squared-off end of the board.

“Mom, what are you doing?”

“Your father had the board and the iron out to do his shirts. While it was hot, I thought I'd press the bills.”

Nat squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. She opened them again. “But why? Why are you ironing money?”

“Oh, sweetie.” Anna gazed over the tops of her cats-eye glasses at her daughter. “To kill bacteria, of course. And any traces of virus.”

Nat opened her mouth to protest that COVID-19 virus particles wouldn't be transmitted by touching money. She should know. Virology was her area of expertise. Just ask the world-class medical school where she had her research lab. She shut her mouth again.

“And then they’re all smooth and tidy, too, so much nicer in the wallet,” her mother continued.

“That’s great. I guess you don’t use your credit card much?”

“Good heavens, no, honey. Do you know how easily they can steal your number? Why, I read about someone who had her entire bank account emptied just like that.” Anna snapped her fingers. “All because she used one of those terrible machines. She only wanted to buy a gallon of milk. It’s a crime.”

Nat’s mother had totally gone off the deep end. Anna had been a brilliant chemist with a dozen patents to her name. But when the pandemic hit, it was as if Mama’s brain had been hit, too – except she’d never contracted the virus.

Nat’s father poked his head in.

“Look who’s here, Max,” Anna said.

“Hey, Papa.” Nat smiled at him.

“This is a nice surprise.” Max Burtseva returned the smile but stayed where he was.

Nat’s visits were always a surprise unless she wrote a letter in advance. Her parents didn’t trust cell phones and wouldn’t answer their land line, claiming it was bugged. They had a laptop, but getting onto the internet was complicated because of all the firewalls they’d set up. And they maintained that email services based in the cloud weren’t safe.

“You almost done there, Anna?” Max’s tone was curt.

“I will be in a little while, darling. Why don’t you come in and chat with our girl?”

“I’m in the middle of a project. And that iron’s next.” He turned and stomped away.

His cranky response seemed to glide over Anna. “He’s such a good man. Rewiring all our appliances.”

“Why’s he doing that?”

“Because they ship them with listening devices in the wires, of course.” Anna smoothed another crumpled bill onto the ironing board with her strong, wide hand and ran the heavy iron over it.

Of course. Nat knew by now not to drag logic into the conversation. A few of the precautions her parents took made sense. They only ate unprocessed meals of certified organic or home-grown food. They double-filtered their water. They cut each other’s hair and did a pretty good job of it.

Other parts of their shared paranoia were simply nuts. And then there was the vaccine question. Nat had given up long ago trying to convince them to get the shots. Max and Anna barely left their house, so it wasn’t much of a surprise they hadn’t gotten sick. Still, when one of them – usually Anna – forayed out for groceries, she didn’t wear a mask or take any precautions against disease.

“There.” Anna patted the stack of smooth greenbacks. She unplugged the iron. “Max, sweetheart,” she called out. “It’s all yours.”

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Nat sat with her parents on the backyard patio over a lunch of fresh-picked salad greens and grilled-cheese sandwiches. The ten-foot high stockade fence her father had built was lined on the inside by a row of tall narrow poplar trees further shielding the Burtsevas from being seen through the neighbors' second-story windows.

"The garden looks great." Nat gestured toward three raised beds flourishing with eggplant, pepper, and tomato plants, trellised pole beans and cukes, and lush zucchini leaves overflowing their box. A long, waist-high box was full of multi-colored lettuces, kale, and Swiss chard.

Her mom laughed. "It's what keeps me sane. We come from good Russian peasant stock, don't forget." She opened her muscular arms wide.

Was it sane to iron money? Nat savored a bite of salad, supposing that sane was a relative term. A breeze blew in a hint of salt air from the nearby tidal marsh. It was nice here in the yard. Long gone was her childhood swingset, but she didn't mind. That was the natural progression of life.

A squirrel scrambled halfway up a white oak and chattered at them. It nibbled on a tiny zucchini, then dropped it.

"Damned garden rats," her father muttered.

"They steal the barely formed squash and ruin them with one bite." Anna shook her head.

"You should have seen what my kitty did to the squirrel she caught," Nat said.

Her mom gasped. "You have a cat now?"

"Didn't I tell you? She's a rescue I got last fall. She has totally eliminated the mouse problem I was having."

“Natasha, you must get rid of the animal.” He father glared. “All these so-called rescue pets are implanted with spy chips.”

Nat didn’t speak for a moment. “I’ll check into that, Papa.” *As if.* Spy chips? How could two people flip out so thoroughly? The only medical care her folks would accept these days was from a naturopath who was an old-fashioned kook, in Nat’s opinion. Instead of paying bills online, her parents wrote paper checks and sent them through the mail, because even the Burtsevas needed municipal water and electricity and owed the town its lawfully due property tax every quarter.

Nat gazed at a pile of freshly turned soil in a corner of the yard. “Are you expanding the garden?”

“Yes,” Max hurried to say.

Except it came at the same time as Anna’s explanation. “That’s where I put the cash box.”

“You buried a cash box in the garden?” Nat’s voice rose.

“Hush. Not so loud.” Anna lowered her voice to a murmur. “I had to take my inheritance out of the bank, you see. They were starting to track me through it.”

All Nat could do was look away. Earlier this year, her mom had inherited nearly a million dollars from an uncle who had died. The money should be invested or donated to a worthy charity. Or even passed along to Nat herself, who hadn’t done well financially in her divorce several years earlier. She hadn’t done well in the marriage, either.

Emotion and empathy had never been part of her life. Her parents certainly hadn’t modeled affection in a marriage. Anna used endearments with everyone but never put the sentiments into action. Her father didn’t express any feelings except anger.

Whatever. The cash shouldn’t be buried next to the sprawling zucchini plant.

Nat stood and gathered the plates. As she turned toward the back door, Max whispered to Anna, but the words didn't escape Nat's excellent hearing.

"You should tell no one. Not even her."

#

A letter came from Nat's father a month later. Nat found it when she arrived home from her lab at ten o'clock that Tuesday night.

Your mother isn't well. Can you come soon?

Nat raised her eyebrows, rereading the two-line note. Mama had seemed fine during their last visit, but of course she would go. As soon as she could.

#

Work was so busy, Nat couldn't get to Newbury until Saturday morning. Even then, her piece-of-crap car had rattled and creaked the entire way. She pulled open the door from the garage to the bungalow and frowned. All the blinds in here were drawn, which wasn't too unusual for this paranoid couple. It was the quiet that was odd.

"Mama? Papa?" she called. "Hello? Are you home?"

No answer. Nat made her way to her parents' first-floor bedroom. The blue comforter was drawn up tight and flat. If her mother was sick, at least she was well enough to be sitting up somewhere. But where was she? Nobody had answered Nat's greeting. The weather was borderline chilly outside, with a wind more typical of later in the fall coming off the coast. Why would her mom be sitting outdoors, especially if she was under the weather?

The sound of a cough came from the kitchen. More of a throat-clearing, really, and a quiet one.

Nat headed through the hall to the back of the house. Both her parents sat at the square kitchen table, its wood finish dinged and dented by decades of use. The dim daylight barely penetrated the slats of the brown Venetian blinds that had always hung in the windows.

Anna glanced up. "Hello, darling."

"Mama, are you okay? Papa said you were ill."

Her mother craned her neck to gaze at Nat. "But he's the one who's sick. Can't you see?" Her words came out slowly, disconnected.

"Papa?" Nat peered at her father.

"I'm fine." His voice was gruff. "Your mother is just paranoid." He coughed into his elbow, today clad in a navy wool turtleneck sweater.

Even looking at the sweater made Nat itchy. It was the end of September, way too early in the year to wear such warm clothes. Plus, her own minor phobia about not liking to be closed in kept her wardrobe free of garments that constricted her neck. The closed blinds didn't help. Nat reached for the cord to flip open the slats so she could see her parents more clearly.

Max winced, shrinking into his shoulders as he covered his eyes.

Nat gave her head a little shake. They'd both seemed well enough a month ago, at least physically. Her father hadn't had a problem sitting outside in the sun. Her mother had spoken normally. What was going on with these two?

A smile crept over Anna's face. "He's fine unless there's too much light." This time her speech seemed more normal. "Well, mostly fine."

"You're the one who insists on keeping all the shades closed," he snapped at his wife. He coughed and wheezed with the effort of speaking.

“The threat is up right now.” Anna’s smile slid away. “We can’t be too careful.”

“What threat is that?” Nat asked.

Her mom laid an index finger over her closed lips, and her eyebrows arched.

Since Nat had been a girl, this had been her mom’s sign for news that needed to be kept secret. Secret from Nat’s father, from the school, from the postal carrier, and more recently, from the government. It didn’t matter. Anna loved to deal in secrets.

But Nat was an adult now, a person with a job and a life of her own. She’d been summoned – by letter sent via the US postal service, no less – to hurry across half the state and tend to her mother’s illness. She had a right to know what variety of paranoid vision her mom was having this time, not that her father was immune to his own warped beliefs.

“What’s the threat, Mama?” She folded her arms.

“It would be too dangerous for you to know, honey.” Anna made a tsking noise.

“Sure.” Nat gave up trying to pry the information out of her. “So, in what ways are you feeling sick? Papa said to come because you were ill. What’s going on?”

“I’m just fine.”

“She’s not,” Max growled. “Look at her skin, Natasha. She’s ill.”

Nat squatted in front of her mom’s chair. “Face the window, Mom.”

Her mom turned toward the open blinds. Nat swallowed. Her mother’s skin had a yellow tinge. Did she have liver disease? A metastasized cancer? Or maybe severe anemia. Whatever the cause, she looked awful. Nat thought back. She didn’t remember Anna ever having been seriously ill. The odd cold, a flu, a sinus infection were about it.

“And you don’t feel sick?” Nat asked her.

“Not a bit. Well, maybe a touch more tired than usual. But, you know, I’ve been so busy putting food by for the winter. If I don’t get the canning and freezing done the second I pick the veggies, they lose so much of their nutritional value.”

“She’s sick, believe me,” Max still held a protective hand above his eyes, as if the light continued to pain him.

Nat glanced back and forth between them. Ever since they’d basically flipped out, it had been hard to know who – and what – to believe.

She set her palms on the table and leaned toward her parents. “Mama, you need to see a doctor. A real doctor. And I’m going to make that happen.”

“I don’t want an allopathic physician, dear,” her mom said. “Yani takes such good care of us. He prescribed a lovely remedy. Why, it’s already made me feel much better.”

“Yani?” Nat tilted her head.

“He’s our naturopath,” she said. “Isn’t he, Max? He has been for years.”

Oh, the kook. Nat hadn’t registered his name before.

“Yes.” Max rolled his eyes as he coughed, a wheezy sound Nat had never heard from him before today. His breath continued to rasp.

They’d had regular, Western-medicine doctors when Nat was growing up. She was open to alternative medicine, but these two took it too far.

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Nat wandered around the back yard twenty minutes later, harvest basket in hand, after Anna asked her to go out and pick whatever produce was ready. She wrinkled her nose to see rotted peppers lying on the ground and tomato plants with brown, wrinkled foliage. The skinny green beans had grown fat and woody. The cucumber vines were wilted from disease. The squash that had escaped the squirrels were monstrous in size. It

looked like her mother hadn't tended her plants for days, and the harvestable vegetables were scant.

Nat mused on her mother and father being ill in different ways and so suddenly. She thought about Mama not trusting banks, and Papa telling her she shouldn't have told even Nat about keeping her inheritance in the garden.

Nat's step slowed at the two-foot wide patch of dirt where her mother had buried the cash. A few clusters of a green vine had sprouted around the edges, but the middle of the soil was disturbed, dark.

She knelt, making sure to stay away from the potentially lethal baby poison ivy. Early on, Nat had learned the phrase, "Leaves of three, let them be." She was extremely reactive to the toxic oil in those leaves of three. She didn't touch the dirt, but she could tell by peering at it from close up that it had been freshly turned over.

She sat back on her heels. Her hands itched, not from poison ivy but from wanting to dig up that cash – if it was even still down there – and deposit it in an insured account where it belonged. Could she extract a trowel or small shovel from the garage and get the job done before either of her parents noticed? She glanced back at the house, where her father had reclosed the blinds before she'd left the kitchen, wheezing as he did.

Mama stepped out onto the deck. "Come back in and have a cup of tea, honey. We're about to go for our naps."

So much for the clandestine rescue of a cash box. Nat pushed up to standing and lifted the basket with its produce barely covering the bottom.

"Coming." Except she might just skip the tea.

#

Nat returned to Newbury Monday at four o'clock. She'd gone in extra early to the lab so she could leave early this afternoon. She'd had the quiet solitude of her workplace and was also able to avoid rush-hour traffic on this end of the day.

She found her parents again sitting in a quiet and darkened kitchen looking even worse than they had on Saturday.

After greeting them, Nat asked how they were feeling.

"Rather poorly, I'm afraid." Anna shook her head.

"I've been better," Papa said through his wheeze, "But I'll be fine. You put your car in the garage, I hope."

"Of course," Nat said. At the start of the pandemic, they'd given her a garage door opener and said it was imperative she never leave her car on the street or even in the driveway. "Listen, I contacted Yani, and he gave me a tincture for each of you."

"Aren't you a dear?" Anna smiled, albeit wanly. "You found him?"

"It wasn't hard," Nat said.

"Thank you, Natasha." Papa sounded worse, too, and for once had no vitriol in his voice.

"Let me make you some tea." Nat filled the kettle and put on to heat. "He said to take the remedy in a hot drink."

"I thought Yani told me he was going to be away," Mama said. "He must have meant next week."

"You've been more and more confused lately, Anna." Max brought his heavy brows together, but the frown got lost in a fit of coughing.

Nat made her own frown at the sink full of dirty dishes but went ahead and brewed two mugs of her mother's homegrown herbal tea mix, then drew two small brown

bottles out of her bag. She used the eyedropper of one to add five drops of liquid to her father's tea and repeated the process with the other bottle for her mother.

"Thank you, darling." Anna cradled her mug in both hands. "Won't you have a cup, too?"

"No. I'm going to head out for a walk. I'll be back in an hour." Nat slid the bottles back in her bag and slung it over her head and across her chest. "I hope the tincture helps. She did say it might take several doses."

"Be careful out there," her father warned. "Watch out for black SUVs with tinted windows."

"I promise."

The only thing she would watch out for were people who might see her empty one bottle into a storm drain and the other into the Parker River. The first bottle joined the rest of the garbage behind a defunct hardware store, and the second became one with the Atlantic Ocean. She hated to throw away glass eyedroppers, because they were expensive. They had to go, too.

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When Nat returned, her parents were both asleep, Papa in his recliner and Mama stretched out on the couch. Nat slid on the rubber gloves she knew would be under the kitchen sink and began to clean up. She loaded the dishwasher with everything in the sink, added the two tea mugs, poured in a little bleach instead of dishwasher detergent, and started the machine. It was old and noisy, but she was pretty sure her parents would sleep through the cycle. She wiped the table down with a bleach mixture, then tossed the gloves into the trash bag, tying the top shut. She fitted a new bag into the container, grabbed the full bag, and headed for home.

Nat needed to stop for gas on the turnpike, which had a handy dumpster behind the restrooms building.

#

“No, sir,” Nat said to the police officer who came to the Newbury home after she called on Wednesday evening to report that both her parents had died in their sleep. “They were fine when I was here on Monday afternoon. They’d said they were going to take a nap, so I drove home to Worcester.”

Anna and Max weren’t fine now. Still in the recliner and on the couch where Nat had left them, both were cold to the touch, and their skin looked waxen. Anna’s yellow tinge was more pronounced than when she’d been alive. Officer McCleary confirmed the absence of life.

“You say they were fine. Were they in good health?” He stood with feet apart and elbows slightly out from his body.

“My mother had recently complained of being tired, and my father was wheezing. That was new for them, but I’d say generally they didn’t have health issues. I think they might have been taking some questionable dietary supplements, though.”

“We’ll take a look around. Tell me, why did you come back tonight?”

“They weren’t answering the phone,” she said. He didn’t need to know they never picked up. “I drove over after work.”

The officer, who looked a decade younger than Nat’s thirty-six, had left the front door ajar. Now two EMTs hurried in, one carrying a big red bag. McCleary held up one hand, palm out. “No rush, fellas.”

One of them knelt next to Anna and pressed gloved fingers to her neck.

“You don’t seem too broken up about your folks being gone,” McCleary said to Nat.

“I’m not an emotional person.” She shrugged. “I’m very sad they’re deceased. I will miss them.”

“You said you left Monday afternoon when they were about to take naps. Neither look elderly. Didn’t they have jobs?”

“They used to. Since the pandemic began, they became quite paranoid about the outside world. When they worked, it was from home.”

“Did they have friends? Other family members?”

“Not that I know of.” Nat rubbed one itchy hand with the other. “I would like to go home, if you don’t mind. This has taken a lot out of me.”

He blinked. “I guess that’d be all right. I’ll need your contact information and a key to the house.”

Nat pulled out a lab business card and added her personal cell number. “They kept their keys on hooks next to the side door in the kitchen. It leads to the garage.”

“Very well. We’ll be in touch.” He glanced at the card. “I’m very sorry for your loss, Dr. Curtis.”

Nat thanked him. “I have the funeral home information back at my house. Do you also have a card? After I get home, I’ll let you know where my parents’ remains need to be taken.”

He winced at the word “remains” but handed her a card.

She took a last look at the lifeless shells of her parents and let herself out the front door. She’d moved her car from the garage to the curb before she called the police, but

parking in the garage came in handy when she first arrived. Nosy neighbors couldn't watch her load a dirty cash box with a satisfying heft into the back of her car.

#

Nat didn't do anything obvious like quit her job or fly to Rio. She was careful not to deposit more than a few thousand dollars of the cash at a time into her account. She started looking at houses to buy so she could move out of this too-small apartment with too-noisy neighbors in a sketchy area of town, but she held off on making a down payment. Nat did purchase a new car. Lots of people did that on a regular basis. The week of itchy, blistered hands was well worth the gain. She deserved the money.

Her boss at the lab said someone from the police had called asking about Nat's work. Nat had always been an exemplary member of the research staff and had landed several large and fully funded grants. Dr. Fitz had nothing but good to say about her. He didn't know she had gained access to the cabinet that housed samples of some of the most lethal and fast-acting viruses on the planet - or that she knew how to disable the surveillance camera remotely.

Nat would never iron her money, but she enjoyed taking advantage of an opportunity when it presented itself. She saw nothing wrong in striking while the iron was hot.