

The First Two Pages: “Enjoy the Silence” by Libby Cudmore  
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An Essay By Libby Cudmore

I’ve been writing about my punk-turned-P.I. Martin Wade and his hipster assistant, Valerie Jacks, since 2017—with the first story, “All Shook Down,” appearing in the Sept/Oct 2020 issue of *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*. Nine stories and a novel, *Negative Girl* (Datura 2024), later, and I’m still finding new mysteries for the two of them to solve.

A Wade & Jacks story usually starts with the image of a client, and Ms. Richmond in the newest story, “Enjoy the Silence,” is one of the finest images yet. I modeled her a little bit on burlesque star Dita Von Teese, and writing her story is an homage to the sultry femme fatale—both vintage and contemporary—that I was immersed in as I started writing crime and mystery in 2005, a golden age of the genre’s revival. I’ve also redeveloped my own interest in vintage clothing, ’90s swing revival, Bettie Page, and sky-high heels (anyone who saw me at Thrillerfest, Bouchercon or the Midwest Mystery Conference knows this to be true), and this story, as well as the forthcoming story “Dr. Bones,” play to this.

The premise of “Enjoy the Silence” is a simple one: a welfare check on Ms. Richmond’s, ah, “friend” turns deadly, and Martin and Valerie find themselves having to solve what the police won’t. Money and influence can buy a lot, but they

can't buy everything, as the Fontaine family soon finds out. And it certainly can't buy Martin and Valerie.

Ms. Richmond might be my favorite side character. She brings out a side of Martin we haven't gotten to see before—although we get hints of in “Wait for the Blackout”—and allows him to be more fully present to the case. Fans of *Negative Girl* might also note this one skews the continuity a bit. Think of this as taking place about a year before the novel. And worry not—this is not the last we'll see of Ms. Richmond.

### **The First Two Pages of “Enjoy the Silence”**

It's a cliché to see a woman with great legs and a nervous way of speaking enter a PI's office. I'd seen *The Maltese Falcon*. I'd read *The Big Sleep*. And yet, Ms. Richmond was sitting in my blue chair like a dream, glancing at the door like she was afraid of who might come in. If it was an act, it was a good one. She had a ballerina's disposition and violet eyes, a silver fox fur collar and a pair of heels that only professional girlfriends wear. She'd come up through the snow and up two flights of stairs in those. I was impressed.

“I'm having trouble getting in touch with a friend of mine,” she said. “We normally meet on Wednesdays, but he never showed up. I called and left a message, but I haven't heard anything back. I just want to know he's safe, that's all.”

“Any reason to think he isn't?”

“It's not like him not to miss one of our dates,” she said. “I certainly don't want to stalk him, but he has a history of depression and he recently confided in me about some family troubles. I just want to know that he's all right. Is that something you could help me with?”

“I'm not sure if a P.I. is the man to handle getting ghosted,” I said.

“Women like me don’t get ghosted, Mr. Wade,” she said. She made my name sound like music.

She was either playing me for a knight or a sap. Possibly both. “Give his name and address to my assistant at the front desk,” I said. “And we’ll see if we can’t locate him for you.”

She smiled and stood and held out her hand. I wondered if she wanted me to kiss it. I wouldn’t dare. I caught a quick glimpse of a tattoo on her left wrist, a rose in full bloom. I caught myself wondering where the rest of her ink was. I knew better than to ask.

“That’s a gorgeous coat,” I heard Valerie say as she printed out her intake form. “Vintage?”

“Yes,” she replied. “A gift from a friend. He had it relined for me, updated a bit. It’s the only part about winter I’m enjoying.”

She bent over the desk and took her time signing. She left behind a retainer and a phone number and the scent of rose oil. “Do the women who walk in here usually look like that?” Valerie asked when she had gone.

“No,” I replied. I wasn’t sure if she was a vision or a fever dream, something I might have imagined falling asleep in front of Turner Classic Movies. At least Valerie saw her too.

“A woman these days doesn’t wear Bettie Page bangs unless she’s a rockabilly scenester or a burlesque performer,” she said. “And in her case, I’m going to guess some variation on the latter. Maybe the private kind.”

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Ms. Richmond didn’t mention that her friend was Kyle Fontaine, heir to the Fontaine Radio fortune. He was probably on his yacht in Saint Tropez or skiing in the Swiss Alps, out of touch in the way that only the wealthy can be. But that also meant that I couldn’t just drive up to his house and ring the doorbell. There would be a wall of housekeepers and managers and lawyers to get through first, and none of them would want a PI poking around in their business.

Valerie filled me in on the details of the Fontaine family. Plato Fontaine, a Civil War veteran, vowed to use his family’s money to bring peacetime through music. He invested in a piano factory in Oneonta, 60 miles from here, then used that money to build the phonograph factory that later made radios. At one point, Valerie told me, every drive-in in the Northeast used Fontaine radios. Production moved overseas in the 1990s, but the family still had their tendrils throughout Perrine. The daughter, Claire, was president of the hospital

board. The oldest son, Andre, maintained the family business. But not a lot was known about Kyle except that he was the youngest, a cryptocurrency trader and a noted recluse. No boards, no foundations, no charity work except a large yearly donation to the Perrine County Animal Shelter.

I called the Fontaine Foundation and left a message with Giles, the assistant. I lied and told him I was calling from the high school, that I was hoping Kyle could come talk to my students. Giles assured me he would pass along my message and phone number and hung up without waiting for my goodbye. For what they were paying him, he didn't need to.

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Libby Cudmore is the author of *Negative Girl* (Datura 2024) and *The Big Rewind* (William Morrow 2016) as well as the Wade & Jacks P.I. series in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Tough*. Her short fiction has appeared in *The Dark*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Stone's Throw* and *HAD*, as well as the anthologies *Mixed Up*, *Welcome Home*, *Hanzai Japan*, *A Beast Without a Name* and *Lawyers, Guns & Money: Crime Fiction Inspired By the Music of Warren Zevon* (co-edited with Art Taylor). She is the 2018 recipient of the Oregon Writer's Colony prize, the 2023 Shamus award for best P.I short story, and the 2023 Black Orchid Novella award. She is the current co-host of the *OST Party* and *Misbehavin'* podcasts and the former co-host of *The Shattered Shield* podcast, and she teaches short fiction through *The Writer's Circle*.