

MICROWAVE IS DEAD

*Southern Humor,
Strangely Perverse*

A Sequel to *Bearing Crosses*

BY PENNY GARDIN LEWIS

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While some family stories are based on the author's memoirs, this is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental or has been told with the person's permission.

In addition, anyone who knows me is fully aware that I am directionally challenged. I took great liberties in this story with geographical locations and directions in Georgia and Alabama. To the fine folks of Graham, Alabama, I apologize for the totally fictitious description of the crash site.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all of my wonderful friends, especially those from PenPals and the Blue Heron Art Studio, who inspire and tolerate me.

And, as always, to my husband, Dan, my daily muse.

ODE TO MICROWAVES

Dearly Beloved, you are a perfect example of form wed to function. You are electromagnetic radiation in the microwave frequency range, and you hunker in pride of place on kitchen counter tops.

Dearly Beloved, you are an electromagnetic radiation appliance which induces polar molecules to rotate to produce thermal energy pronto for impatient connoisseurs of the Ole Quick and Easy.

Your polar molecules rotate, rotate, rotate to provide hungry gourmets fish sticks and chicken fingers. Your uniform excitation evenly heats leftovers in a dielectric heating process.

Dearly beloved by all who know and utilize you, O, Microwave, your carousel revolves clockwise until pause, stir, recover, restart-- then counterclockwise. Ding. Ding. "Come and get it. Lean Cuisine's ready."

Eleanor Wolfe Hoomes 7/10/17

PROLOGUE

The water was cold . . . cold on the skin . . . cold in the mouth . . . cold in the lungs. The little girl fought with all of her six-year-old might against the snarled roots at the bottom of the river that held her ankle. Bending her knee and thrusting, she wriggled free at last, leaving her rubber boot behind. It was too late. She had no breath left to swim to the top. One more gasp . . . one more gulp of the murky water. Her last conscious thought was “Daddy.” She couldn’t see anymore. Only darkness.

The sparkly pink shirt hung from the low tree branch, catching the light like a lone beacon signaling rescue. It hung there for hours until the heavy winds and rain loosened its hold and sent the shirt flying through the air and into the frigid waters below. The garment, caught in the current, floated more than a mile downstream, finally stopping at a large boulder and mangles of debris in the river’s center. The little girl’s shirt, like hope, lingered there for days.



MICRO
WAVE
15
DEAD

CHAPTER 1 I AM NOT A DETECTIVE

Let me make something perfectly clear. Despite solving the mystery of a decapitated head in a salad bowl, WE ARE NOT detectives! But, my crazy twin sister, Pam Hill, thinks we are. We are, in fact, two retired, menopausal, middle-aged women, with grown children and lots of hobbies. Pam was loving . . . reveling in . . . the attention that our story had garnered. For weeks, every time I picked up a newspaper, I would read a story about the adventure of twins Penny and Pam. And a lot of it wasn't even true. Facts were distorted giving us far too much credit. Thankfully, a year had gone by, the buzz had died down, and normal life had resumed . . . for the most part.

Last September, my sister and I had left for an innocent trip to take pictures of roadside cross memorials to help our, perfectly healthy, Mom plan her final wishes. We inadvertently got swept up in the beheading murder of our cousin Jacey's husband, Junebug, in Athens, Tennessee. The two of us were only trying to help Jacey's funny little attorney and a handsome detective gather some of the facts. We, or at least I, had no expectation that we would solve the case. But we did. And we nearly got ourselves killed doing so, mainly because of Pam.

I am fourteen minutes older than my twin, and so, I should be the mature adult in this relationship . . . the leader. But she drags me into trouble even when I know better. It wasn't always this way.

When we were babies, living in Alaska, I learned to crawl first. Pam hung on to my feet and let me drag her around from place to place. She did this for months until I got strong enough, and grew tired of her weight, to kick her a time or two. Only then did she start crawling on her own. Okay, maybe I need to rethink who the leader was in that situation.

I'll try again. As pre-teens in Douglasville, Georgia, I would encourage Pam . . . or dare her . . . to try things I was curious about,

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but was afraid to do . . . like shaving legs, wearing tampons, or using makeup. She wouldn't even hesitate. I would wait to see how our mom reacted and if she was okay with it, then it was clear sailing for me to do the same. When a boy called Pam in seventh grade, I sat at the kitchen table and studied my mom's reaction. She just smiled and handed Pam the phone. So, I knew that it would be okay to give Cleve, from my Social Studies Class, my phone number. Dad didn't pay attention to such things, leaving the approval decisions to Mom. And Mom was very trusting of us and generous in allowing Pam and me to grow with new pubescent experiences. Still, I was always the cautious one. I think this is a better example of my leadership skills.

I was happy to get back to my life in Georgia with my husband Dan, our mentally ill cat Roxie, and our rescue goldfish Judy, and put the whole nightmare behind me. Pam, on the other hand, wasn't done. She's a huge fan of the ID Channel and Forensics Files and so she answered every call from reporters and Hollywood folks who wanted to do a story on our adventure. Not me! I didn't know if the bad guys had vengeful relatives that might come after us. I just wanted to disappear into obscurity and peacefully cook quick, delicious meals for Dan in my microwave, write my children's plays, paint canvases on the back porch easel, and make pottery at the Blue Heron. I wanted to be left alone, but that wasn't going to happen. Not as long as Pam kept taking those calls.

CHAPTER 2
JENKEM
(Three Months Earlier)

Teg Duke walked out of Reston County Prison, a free man. Fifteen years inside had sallowed his skin and aged him more than any coke or booze could have ever done. The crime that sent Teg away wasn't drugs or alcohol related. It was an innocent little fling with a hot, cute girl. At least that's how he saw it. The prosecutor, the judge, and the jury saw it as sexual assault on a minor. The child was twelve, the daughter of Teg's pretend girlfriend, Eunice. Eunice wasn't much to look at and it killed Teg inside to have to sleep with her. She was big as a whale and had rotten teeth, and saggy tits. But, you do what you gotta do. Occasionally screwing Eunice was the only way he could get close to Amber.

Whenever the opportunity presented itself, when Eunice went shopping or to the hairdresser, Teg would have little dates with young Amber. That's how he thought of them, "dates." He started with sitting beside the pretty little brown haired girl and watching cartoons, sharing a bowl of ice cream or popcorn. Eventually, his hand would move to her leg and rest there. Then to her waistband. It was months before he got Amber to return the favors he bestowed on her. He never meant to go much further than oral sex. It was easy to keep that a secret . . . until it wasn't.

Teg couldn't believe the bitches had turned him in. After a memorable episode that went a lot further and was way more brutal than Teg had intended in the early stages of his "dating" the girl, Amber broke down crying at school. After some prodding, she told her teacher and the teacher, in turn, told Eunice and the police.

The woman judge . . . another bitch . . . sentenced him to twenty years, ten to serve. Most of his time was spent on Tier 3 because he was a sexual predator. Pedophiles, trans-genders, and rapists were sent to Tier 3 for their own protection. It grated on Teg to be lumped in with all the nut jobs. His current cellmate, Jimmy, was one of the he-shes, and Teg had come close to killing

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the weirdo squirrel a time or two. But he was smart enough to know that, however justified, murder would keep him in prison forever, and he wanted out.

With pretrial time served, Teg could have been out of there in ten, but trouble followed him during his stay. He had developed a hatred for one particular guard, Delvin Spencer, and that hatred had consequences. Teg saw right away that the guard had a stick up his ass. Officer Spencer was a foot short of being a midget and tried to make up for it by spending any off time at the gym, lifting weights to build up his tiny muscles. Teg could tell from his jaw line that he enhanced them with steroids, too. On top of that, he was an asshole who took his authority too far, daring defiance. All the inmates hated the little pumped up runt, but none more than Teg. And the feeling was mutual.

Spencer would smirk at Teg as he walked by his cell and would make comments like “You dreaming good tonight, Baby Raper?” Worse, he’d imply Teg was screwing Jimmy. And Teg was no homo. Spencer would say shit like “You girls quit playing with each other’s pee pees and go to sleep.” Or, “Jimmy’s just your type Duke. Ain’t you gotta thing for little girls?”

Another time, Spencer claimed Teg had spit at him. Teg had done no such thing. Spencer had been yelling up at him for dawdling on the yard. The whistle had sounded and Teg had been in no hurry to go back to his unair-conditioned cell. It was a beautiful day and a breeze was blowing, and so he’d taken his time. When Spencer stood on his tiptoes to try to scream in Teg’s face to “Get a move on, Baby Raper,” Teg had yelled a string of expletives right back. A little spittle flew out in the heat of the moment, but it wasn’t intentional. Spencer called in reinforcements, and his lie caused Teg to spend three painful hours in a restraint chair with a mesh spit hood over his face.

Teg bided his time. A week later, he was standing in line for chow when Spencer walked by him and made a sound like he was hawking up a loogie. Teg wasn’t sure if Spencer was going to spit a wad at him in retaliation, or if he had made the sound to frame

him again. Didn't matter. One good punch in the jaw to the little piss ant corrections officer, followed by a write up, followed by another court hearing, and Teg was assigned two years in solitary in a hole they called the "Shoe." That should have been enough to make him walk the straight and narrow. But of course it wasn't, and Teg actually liked the Shoe . . . liked having a cell to himself.

That night, the night of the Jenkem, Teg took note that Delvin Spencer was on duty and would be overseeing his tier. Staffing at night had been short lately, and there was a good chance that he could pull off a Jenkem on old Delvin. The son of a bitch was still provoking Teg . . . ordering him around . . . tossing his cell for imagined contraband . . . pushing him against the wall extra hard during a body search. Most of all, he knew Spencer was behind transferring Jimmy back to his house after his time in the Shoe, just so he could continue his taunting.

Like other long stint prisoners, Teg liked to refer to his cell as his "house." Why not? It's where he lived . . . at least for now. He made sure Jimmy knew that it wasn't HIS house and the girly squirrel sure wasn't Teg's guest. Jimmy was a diseased, interloping rat that needed to be trapped and poisoned, and Teg had said as much to his cellmate. Jimmy would just laugh at him, too crazy to feel threatened.

Jimmy was always getting himself sent to the psych ward by doing idiotic stuff like sticking a pencil up his pee hole. He'd save up food from his tray to smoosh and rub on his skin like it was girl's makeup. One day, Jimmy had peanut butter eyelids and he hung over his bunk and fluttered them at Teg. Teg couldn't stand him, but he hated the guard worse. Tonight would take care of both problems because he knew he'd be back in the Shoe for a long, long time. It was worth it. He preferred solitary.

Teg lay on his bunk and watched Jimmy doing little sissy leg lifts on the cold concrete floor. Jimmy would squeal "Ouchy" in his annoying high-pitched voice after each and every lift. Jimmy did this routine every night before bed. Tonight, Teg said nothing.

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He knew Jimmy would finish and climb in his bunk and go to sleep.

Finally, Teg heard Jimmy snoring from the bunk above. He reached behind the toilet and pulled out a plastic bag. He'd been saving his piss and shit for days and had let it cook up nicely in the garbage bag. The fermented mixture was known as "Jenkem" amongst prisoners and considered a lethal weapon by the guards. Some cons even added their blood to nasty up the concoction even more. Teg just stuck to the basics.

Teg opened the bag, gagging on the foul odor. It took a minute or two before he could continue. He knew it was easier to get used to your own stink than someone else's. So it wasn't long before he was able to take a deep breath and put his mouth over the opening of the bag. Teg blew enough air to make a good sized balloon, and then wiped his mouth and tied off the bag. He waited by the bars, a patient man.

Around midnight, Teg heard footsteps coming down the tier. It was a rare quiet night. Usually, men were crying, hollering, singing, cussing, or carrying on late into the night. But not tonight. This night, the cons were surprisingly settled. It was gonna be a great night on Tier 3.

Delvin Spencer had his flashlight out looking into each cell. He was delighted that nothing was going on for once and, just maybe, he and the other guards could spend the remaining seven hours of their shift playing some gin rummy or cribbage in the office. His shoulder mic crackled with officer Burton reporting that Tier 2 was clear and all inmates were bunked in. This was followed by officer Parham reporting an all clear for Tier 1. He'd be making the same report shortly.

A shadow from the last cell stopped Spencer and caused him to twitch. A tingling chill ran down his back, clenching his sphincter. He knew it was Teg's house. The prisoner had broken his jaw two years back and he would never forget the pain. His jaw had been wired for weeks, and he'd dropped ten pounds of muscle

mass eating pureed food through a straw. On cold days, the jaw still ached.

Spencer stepped forward to the edge of the cell.

“Who’s up in there? Lights out faggots. Get in your bunks.”

No sound. He took another step, shining the flashlight up and down. And another step.

Then, from within the cell, he heard, “Eat my shit you little piss ant!”

And with that statement, Teg hurled the Jenkem at Spencer. Bullseye! The bag exploded right in the officer’s face. Teg jumped back to avoid the overspray. The officer screamed, clawing at his eyes and mouth.

“That’ll teach ya to open your big mouth. Taste good to you piss ant?”

Spencer fell to the floor, writhing and yelling. His cries were inhuman . . . guttural. And with each scream, more of the pickled fecal juice ran into his mouth, up his nose, and in his eyes.

Jimmy sat up in his bunk and squealed in his little girl voice. “Oooo . . . Look what you did!”

Feet running down the hall . . . Officers with helmets, shields and pepper spray signaled an end to Teg’s fun. He was ready for the Shoe and a happy, happy man.

And, he did go to the Shoe. But, that wasn’t all. The attack lengthened his stay an extra five years, and that really pissed him off. Nobody cared that he was only defending himself . . . that he was justified. Nothing he could do about it, and it didn’t matter. He was out now. And he was hungry. Hungry as a man could be hungry. But not for food.

CHAPTER 3 A HORRIBLE DEATH

My microwave is dead. I found out from a note written on a napkin by my husband and left on the living room ottoman at the foot of my favorite chair. That is exactly what the note said, “*MICROWAVE IS DEAD.*” Nice way to start my morning. This was a full year after the grisly adventure with Pam, and it is just the type of case I’m more comfortable solving. I didn’t have to call in a forensics team to help with this one. I knew who killed my microwave. I’ve warned Dan over and over to put plastic wrap over stuff he nukes. But does he listen? No!

Just to be sure, I went to the kitchen and put a cup of water inside the microwave. I wasn’t sure what the water was for, but I’ve always heard you were supposed to do that if you had nothing to cook. I looked over at my pristine, hardly used stove and prayed. “Please, Jesus, with all your majestic angels sitting on big, thick, fluffy clouds playing on golden harpsichords, don’t let my microwave be dead. And, please don’t make me have to cook on that stove with pots and pans. Amen.” That task done, I hit the quick start button putting a minute on the timer, and pressed the larger start button. Nothing. I wiggled the plug. Nothing. I unplugged it and waited ten minutes before re-plugging, like we do when the cable goes out. Nothing.

I called Pam to tell her about this horror. My twin was less than sympathetic.

“Dan didn’t kill your microwave. It died from overuse and abuse. If you would cook on a stove like a real person, you would find that your food actually has flavor.”

Pam is so judgmental.

I put in a call to POLLOCK’S APPLIANCE AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENT REPAIR over on Cedar Street. Neil Pollock arrived with his red and rusty tool box later in the afternoon.

He examined my microwave making little tsk-tsk mutterings as he worked.

Penny Gardin Lewis

“Somebody heat left over spaghetti in this appliance without covering the dish with plastic wrap?”

“Yes. That would be my husband.”

Neil reached in his toolbox without looking and pulled out a tool that looked like a staple remover to snag the little pin that holds the waveguide cover in place.

“How about Chicken pot pie?”

I felt very defensive. “That would also be Dan.”

More tsk tsking and muttering, as he removed the waveguide cover and shined a pin light.

“You know folks think the microwave was invented in World War II by the Army.”

“I’ve heard that.”

“Yeah, well. They’re wrong.”

“You don’t say.”

Neil had a wire brush that he inserted into the waveguide opening and began making little circular motions. The man is a genius with appliances and musical instruments.

“Evidence shows it was first carried in the Ark of the Covenant thousands of years ago, and it was used as a lethal weapon.”

“The Ark of the . . . You mean in the Bible? Did they have electricity back then?”

He ignored my question and replaced the wire brush with a long dowel covered in lambskin. I seemed to remember that same tool, years ago when he fixed my son Chris’ trumpet.

He quoted, “*It glowed in the dark, made whirling noises, and killed everyone that laid hands on it . . .* Sounds familiar don’t it?”

“I see your point.” I was amused and oddly, almost convinced.

“I believe that if the Ark is found today, we will see written in ancient Hebrew, the name *Amanna* . . . The Jews ate Manna . . . I’m just sayin’”

I didn’t know if he was pulling my leg, but I was highly entertained. Sadly, after an hour of trying, Neil pronounced my Microwave as most sincerely dead. Whatever an inverter is, mine

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had shorted out, and it would cost about the same to repair as to buy new. There would be no second coming.

And that's what led me to the place of my nightmares . . . the place to which I had sworn I'd never return . . . The Carrollton Walmart.

