

LILY IN BLACK
(A Nero Wolfe story)
by
Gregory Smith

Nero Wolfe has been called "the famous fat detective of Manhattan." While not endearing, that description is accurate. "Genius" works, too. In his office, on the first floor of the brownstone where he lives on West 35th Street, the red leather chair is the seat of honor. On that November morning it was occupied by Miss Lily Rowan. She was wearing a black jacket and skirt suit, with black gloves. A small black hat trailed a short black veil over her forehead. A black handbag sat on the small table next to the chair.

The other chairs in Wolfe's office -- the ones for guests -- are upholstered in yellow. In the first one to Miss Rowan's left, the one directly in front of Wolfe's desk, sat Police Inspector Fergus Cramer of Homicide West. His black suit was neat. His black tie had been carefully tied. Those who knew him well would tell you that this was uncharacteristic. He was biting glumly on the end of an unlit cigar.

"Helluva thing," he said quietly, and shook his head. "Helluva thing."

On Cramer's left sat Saul Panzer, the best private detective operative in New York, and therefore (of course) the world. And that's not just my opinion. Small, with a big nose and ears, he was someone you would never notice, but would trust instantly if you did. He was also dressed in a black suit.

Behind Miss Rowan sat Police Detective Seargent Purley Stebbins, a rough, muscular man with a rough, muscular face. That day he was wearing his dress blues, his large hands holding his hat in his lap. He sat very straight,

like a small boy on his best behavior who wished he was somewhere else.

To Stebbins's left, behind Cramer, sat Fred Durkin, another private detective -- not a threat to win a MacArthur Grant, but a good guy to have at your back. And also wearing a black suit. And, finally, to his left sat a tired-looking woman in a calf-length black dress with elbow-length sleeves, and black gloves that almost met the bottoms of the sleeves. Really, with her round black hat, she could have stepped out of a decade early in the last century. She was Fred's wife.

Nero Wolfe sat behind his desk, facing them all, the backside of his seventh-of-a-ton fitted to his custom-made chair. He, too, wore a black suit and tie, and a yellow shirt.

"Helluva thing," muttered Cramer.

"I always wished him dead," said Stebbins, to no one in particular, "but now that he's gone, I..." In his voice I could hear a tear well up in his eye.

Cramer jabbed his cigar over his shoulder, without turning. "Go on, Stebbins!" he ordered. "Get outta here. The funeral's over. Get back to work on the case."

Purley jumped up and hurried out, his jaw set, like a man who wanted to be working on the case. We heard the front door close behind him.

"Helluva thing," said Cramer.

"Inspector," said Wolfe, "you know that Archie was more than my factotum."

"How can I," said Cramer absently, "when I don't know what it means?"

"Mr. Wolfe," said Lily, "you and Archie were Yin and Yang, the two opposites who together make the perfect One."

Wolfe scowled at her. "The ancient Eastern philosophy of Yijing, from which is derived the principle of Taiji, too often identified by the vulgar term 'Yin and Yang,' holds that the universe contains of equals parts of good and evil, comfort and pain, growth and decay, beauty and hideousness. Do you contend that the evil and decay in my relationship with Archie was of the same magnitude as the growth and good? Bah! Babble to the booboisie."

Lily smiled wanly.

"Inspector," continued Wolfe, "bringing Archie's killer to justice is a burden that destiny has placed on my shoulders."

"It's a police matter," said Cramer, although again almost absently, without even looking at Wolfe. "Stay out of it."

"I will not. You know as much. I owed Archie an accumulated debt which, now, I will never have the opportunity to discharge. I will owe you a debt, sir, if you tell me what the police know. You are aware it wounds my esteem to be indebted to you, but my esteem must be penultimate."

"Something comes before your esteem? Nuts to your esteem," said Cramer, but he was speaking out of habit -- without combativeness.

"Inspector," said Lily quietly, "I'd also like to know how the investigation is going. Archie's death has cost no one more than it has Mr. Wolfe and me. I think it's only right."

Cramer chewed on the cigar, then removed it from his mouth. "Well," he said, "we'd know a helluva lot more if *you*," jabbing the cigar at Wolfe -- some of his spirit was returning -- "hadn't erased the hard drive in Goodwin's computer."

"I assure you I did no such thing."

"No, of course *you* didn't. You couldn't turn the damn thing on to save your life. Even if the switch was right in the middle on the front. Which it is. But you arranged for it to be erased."

"I assure you I have no idea how it was erased."

"Whatever. You can interpret those words literally and wriggle. Panzer? What do you know about what happened to Goodwin's computer?"

"Not a thing," said Saul.

"Durkin?" said Cramer, but then checked himself: "No, Durkin wouldn't know. And I won't ask you," he said to Wolfe, "what you know."

Wolfe nodded an eighth of an inch.

"You aren't sorry," said Cramer, "to see that data gone."

"I have no idea what Archie committed to the infernal contraption, but it could have been information obtained in confidence."

"Information you were afraid we would discover when we got a warrant. You knew we'd get a warrant, didn't you. Because you knew his death had something to do with those e-mails."

"Inspector," said Wolfe, and suddenly he sounded tired, "please do not badger. I've just returned from the funeral of someone whose relationship to me lacks even a word to express it." He paused. "I have suffered a wound that will never heal."

Cramer bit the end of the cigar. "Well, don't worry about your confidential data. Whoever erased the computer did a damn good job. He was an expert, and our experts can't salvage anything. I hope you paid him well. The information on that hard drive might have contained a clue to the killer."

"That knowledge weighs on me," said Wolfe.

"Well, I'll tell you this much: It was a well-thought out, well-executed plot, that was put in motion months ago. It was not a heat-of-the-moment thing, no matter how it looked at the scene. The killer is almost certainly an enemy that you and Archie made, maybe a long time ago. And consider this: I'd guess that they'd have rather killed you."

"I would rather they had, too," said Wolfe.

Cramer paused. "Maybe you would," he said, "but you wear this house like a turtle wears his shell. Archie, he was a different story. He had weaknesses they could exploit, and they played him like a damn violin.

"Despite your best efforts, not all the e-mails are gone. We recovered a few from backup tapes at Archie's ISP."

"Aye es pee?" said Wolfe. "Is that Spanish?"

"ISP. His Internet Service Provider, as anybody in the world except you would know. The company that handled his e-mail."

"E-mail," said Wolfe, "the voice of the beckoning siren."

"Save the melodrama. If they hadn't done it this way, they would have found another. Whoever did this knew exactly what they were after, and were determined to get it.

"Miss Rowan," Cramer turned to her. "This is going to get rough."

"Thank you, Inspector," said Lily, "but I already know there's another woman. That much was in the papers. It doesn't bother me. Archie and I had had an open relationship. I want to hear *everything* that has to do with his death. And I want Mr. Wolfe to hear it, too."

Cramer took a folded sheet of paper from an inside pocket of his jacket. "Here's one of the messages. Do you want to read it?"

"Please read it out loud, so Mr. Wolfe and I can both hear."

Cramer read, dispassionately:

Archie, my Archiekins.... How I long for you to hold me in an embrace from which I cannot escape. Oh! Archie! Brush your lips across my forehead, then touch them to my closed eyes, then crush my lips in a kiss and force your tongue into my mouth. I will give you everything, my Archie, everything. Just take me.

Cramer folded the sheet and returned it to his pocket. "We recovered other messages. More of the same."

Saul said, "What about tracing their source?"

Cramer shook his head. "Every e-mail message records where it came from, and the route that it took to get to where it was going. But where it came from can be faked, and in this case the sender knew enough about e-mail to send it by a route that doesn't lead back to anything we can use. My experts are stumped.

"You can see what I mean when I say that this was well thought out.

"This is what we think happened: Archie met a woman on the Internet, one thing led to another, and they were having what they today call a 'cyber-relationship.' Or... um... cybersex."

Lily looked away.

"Then," said Cramer, "they moved from the cyberworld to the real world. Two weeks ago Friday, on the first, they spent the evening at the Flamingo."

"The Woman in the Veil," said Lily.

"Yes, the Woman in the Veil. By the way, it was the *Gazette* that started

calling her that, with the capital letters. Not us.

"She was dressed tastefully and expensively -- a pink silk dress with a full, knee-length skirt. Matching heels and gloves. No stockings -- you see the kind of attention she attracted. Graceful when she walked. A great dancer. 'Elegant,' some said. Five-seven, 120 pounds, dark hair. Legs muscular, but in a feminine way. I mention her hair and her legs because those were the only parts of her that anyone saw. She was wearing a veil that completely covered her face. Also matched her dress. No one saw her face -- not even her eyes.

"She and Archie made quite a couple. He wore a white dinner jacket, and a white silk shirt with a banded collar. The collar was fastened with a diamond stud. Very stylish." Cramer cocked an eyebrow at Wolfe. "You must have paid him a pretty penny to afford a stud like that."

"It was a gift from me," said Lily quietly.

"I'm sorry."

"It's alright, Inspector. Please go on."

"They didn't try to hide that they were there. Everyone's eyes were on them. At the end of the evening, they parted company at the door. And she disappeared.

"That brings us to last Friday, the eighth, the night of the crime. Again, Archie met the Woman in the Veil at the Flamingo, but this night ended differently. They left together. More specifically, they got a room at the Churchill." Cramer paused and shot a look at Lily. "They... had sex. Then, at about 2:30 am, the Woman in the Veil was seen leaving the hotel. And that's the last anyone's heard of her. Archie's body

was found by the maid when she went in to make up the room at 9:10 am.

"He was naked," said Cramer, clinically. "He was on his back on the floor near the bed. The cause of death was a single stab wound to the torso. The murder weapon was a double-edged straight-blade knife, similar to a bayonet. It was still in him. It entered just under the breastbone, and traveled sharply upward into the heart. It was driven all the way to the hilt," he hesitated, "and then twisted."

"Huh!" said Fred.

"Yeah," said Cramer, turning his head a few inches. "You were a Marine in the War, weren't you Durkin." Cramer turned his eyes back to Wolfe. "The way Archie was stabbed is the way the military trains its soldiers to make a sure, silent kill."

Wolfe stirred. "This Woman in the Veil struck this blow?"

"Whoever 'struck this blow' was an expert. You know Archie -- he had the reflexes of a cat..."

"Are the sure instincts of one as well."

"Yeah. That too. Whoever did this must have had a moment of surprise, because with Archie, you would have to, or you'd never get away with it. But it couldn't have more than a moment, because Archie would never allow more than that. They had one and only one chance. It had to be executed perfectly the first time. It took nerve, to do it like that."

"You are saying the Woman in the Veil was a professional."

"I'm saying this was a professional operation. It's a stretch that the woman at the Flamingo stabbed Archie like that. Maybe there was a male accomplice. Or maybe the Woman in the

Veil wasn't a woman at all. Maybe that was the reason for the veil."

Wolfe's eyebrows elevated an eighth of an inch.

"Could Archie," said Cramer, "have been one of those doors that swung both ways?"

Lily's eyebrows elevated practically into her hairline. "Hardly!" she said.

"Well," said Cramer, "these days you never know. We've got cops... but that's a different story. But if the Woman in the Veil stabbed Archie, she was a Nikita."

"A Nikita?" asked Wolfe.

"*Le Femme Nikita*," said Saul, "is a French film about a female super-assassin. There's a remake in English, but I recommend the original, in the original language."

Wolfe grunted. "What," he asked Cramer, "have your scientists learned?"

Cramer hesitated. "This has to be confidential. This could be material to the investigation. I shouldn't tell you. But, under the circumstances, I can tell you that our forensic evidence is... zip. Nothing. Not a shred."

Wolfe repeated elevating his eyebrows.

"Yeah," said Cramer, "how unbelievable is that? At the Flamingo, we have nothing we can tag to her. No fingerprints, no DNA on the rim of a glass -- you've heard of DNA? So have we. Nothing.

"At the Churchill, they had sex -- we know that from... from the autopsy on Archie's body -- and they did whatever else they did, but still she left us nothing. Nothing! Not a single fingerprint we can't account for. No DNA. No hairs. No skin cells. No saliva."

"Is it conceivable," said Wolfe, "that your investigators are nincompoops?"

"Hardly. But when the veiled woman left, she took the sheets and pillowcases with her. Everything else was wiped."

"Archie's... body?"

"It seems he took a shower before he was killed. We found used bath towels. *She* may have taken the shower with him -- one of the bath towels was also missing. So she cleaned up any evidence that was on him even before she killed him. And before you ask, no, we didn't get anything from the shower drain, but we tried."

"She left with sheets, pillowcases, a towel, and no one noticed?"

"Someone noticed. When she left she was carrying a Macy's shopping bag. It could have held a lot. But no one thought anything of it at the time. She looked like a Macy's kind of girl."

For a moment no one spoke.

"Did you find Archie's gun?"

Wolfe asked.

"We found no guns."

"His holster?"

Cramer bit hard on the end of his cigar.

"No." He stood. He walked deliberately to the wastebasket beside Archie's desk, bent down, and carefully disposed of the mangled cigar.

"Since he's not here anymore," said Cramer, looking Wolfe in the eye, "to pick it up when I miss.

"Goodby, Miss Rowan, Mrs. Durkin." He nodded to Saul and Fred, and left. Once more we listened to the front door close.

"It's so not like Archie," blurted Fred, and his wife burst into tears.

"Archie was always so sweet," she said. "Whenever he traveled, he'd

bring gifts for the children, from wherever he went. You wouldn't think, to hear him talk about himself, that he was that type of man, but he was."

"Fred, madam," said Wolfe quickly – lachrymotic women sent him into a panic -- "I know you must return to your children. Grieving is a journey. I wish you well on yours."

"If there's anything I can do," said Fred, with real passion, as he guided his wife to the door.

"There may be, but for now, please, go to your family!"

When they were gone, Wolfe sighed and closed his eyes.

"Saul," he said, reopening them, "Archie's weapons?"

Saul went to Archie's desk and opened the lower right-hand drawer. He took out a small assortment of handguns, then returned them to the drawer.

"As far as I can tell, everything's here. Especially the Marley. You know that the Marley...."

"...I know that the Marley," interrupted Wolfe. "Thank you, Saul. I'll be in touch when you can be of assistance."

"Thank you, sir. Miss Rowan." He nodded, and we heard the front door close for the last time.

So now you should be asking yourself (if you've been keeping count), who are "we"? Or, better, who am I? Everyone's split except Wolfe and Lily. Well, I'm sure not Wolfe, so that means yep, I'm Lily. It's been fun writing about myself in the third person, but now that it's just Wolfe and me, the game is over.

"You spoke the truth," Wolfe said, "earlier, when you said that Archie's death has deprived no one of more than it has you and me."

"And so it seems fitting," I said, "that, at the end, we should be alone together?"

Wolfe flinched visibly, but I smiled at him. I used my special winning smile.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I know so very well how you feel about women. I've teased you in the past, but after what happened to Archie, I'll respect your feelings in the future."

"About what happened to Archie," said Wolfe, "doesn't it strike you as...."

"Bizarre," I said, "bizarre. Can you believe the police actually think that Archie may have been bi?"

"Fred noted," said Wolfe, "that it was so unlike Archie. And, as mundanely as it was expressed by Inspector Cramer, it was a 'helluva thing.'"

"And there's nothing to go on."

"Not necessarily."

"You have a clue?"

"An inkling. A glimmer. You say there is nothing to go on, but consider that Archie's murder was an enterprise of considerable complexity. Many small details required attention. Any one of them may have left a trace that has not yet been discovered. And only one trace would be required. If my inkling identifies a credible suspect, Saul and Fred will be set on the trail, looking for that trace. Once the police discover whom we pursue, they will turn their considerable resources to the same goal. It will be a contest, then, a race, Saul and Fred against the police, to see who uncovers the trace first. Or, rather, the first trace -- there may reasonably be more than one, once the course of investigation has been set."

"But how will you identify a credible suspect? Is it a case you and

Archie were working on? And might there be more than one credible suspect?"

"No, not a case," said Wolfe.

"And no, there can only be one credible suspect.

"The germ of the credible suspect lies in the words of Fred Durkin and Inspector Cramer: 'It wasn't like him,' and 'a hell of a thing.' Let us review: Archie -- a preternatural when it came to attracting women in the flesh -- was engulfed this time by a deluge of dancing electrons, of speeding packets, behind a veil of anonymity that is not a physical veil, but the replacement of a face with words on a refulgent flat-screen liquid crystal display. He was deluded into a relationship with, not a woman, but a chimeral succubus he met on the Internet."

"Just like millions of other guys these days," I said.

"But unlike the deluded millions, Archie was an experienced detective. One with acuity. And one with many enemies. Why wouldn't he have learned more about this woman, and her connections and motivations? Is the veil of the liquid crystal flat-screen that bewitching? I think not.

"Archie would have tried to locate the source of the messages. When he found they were untraceable -- that the traces had been deliberately obscured -- he should have become suspicious. I posit that it did.

"Then he arranged to meet this woman in the flesh. They danced. They met again, and danced again. Then a rendezvous in a hotel room. This, a woman Archie did not know, whose intentions he could not divine? Would he have done such a thing?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Sometimes it sounds like Archie, and sometimes it doesn't."

"Pfui. None of what I have said is of consequence. The only question that is, is this: Are we to believe that when Archie -- a man with many enemies -- went to meet that woman -- a parlous rendezvous -- he went unarmed?"

"No, *that* makes no sense. Can you make sense of it?"

"No. For Archie it would have been apostasy. Therefore the statement of posits must be incorrect. Change them, Miss Rowan."

"How?"

Wolfe turned up a palm. "Archie must not have conducted Internet correspondence with a chimera. He must not have had an assignation with a strange woman."

"But we have copies of the messages, and they were seen together."

"You are placing the emphasis on the wrong words, as you are well aware. He carried on a correspondence, but not with a chimera, and he had an assignation, but not with a strange woman. That is the reason he was unarmed."

I said nothing.

"Archie," continued Wolfe, "wasn't killed by a stranger -- a 'Nikita' -- whom he met on the Internet. He was killed by someone he knew well, and trusted. With his life."

"You're saying me."

"Madam, yes, I am."

"Why would Archie and I correspond as though we were strangers, when he knew it was me? And why would I date Archie wearing a veil?"

"Perhaps the two of you were injecting 'freshness' into your relationship. Perhaps you played at being strangers, and contrived the conceit of a 'fling.' Confound it, I am not a relationship counselor!"

"Except you're saying that, on my part, it wasn't the conceit of a fling. It was a plot to kill him."

"Indeed."

"Okay," I said, and I leaned back in my chair, "ya got me."

"Madam, do not jest."

I carefully uncrossed and recrossed my legs. They're good legs -- shapely and muscular. I know they are. I work darn hard on them at the gym. And the mid-thigh-length skirt displayed them favorably. I know it did. That's why I wore it. Wolfe flinched again.

"I'm not jesting," I said. "'Jest' -- such a quaint word! Do you remember the time, so many years ago now, when I said that if I ever murdered anyone, it would be Archie? You do? Of course I killed him. He was a callous twit."

"He may have been a twit, madam, but he meant more to me than any person still living, and only one other now dead. I will see his murderer brought to justice."

"By which you mean... me?"

"I mean you."

"You have nothing on me. Nothing that will stick."

"So you say. But you have left a trail, and now that you are found out, that trail will be uncovered. Can the electronic mail account be linked to your computer? Where was the knife purchased? The clothing that you wore to the Flamingo? How did you arrive and leave? Somewhere, there is a trace."

"No," I said, "actually, there isn't. I used false identities for everything -- credit cards, phone numbers, even addresses. And nothing regarding those identities can be tied to me. I've lived separate and parallel lives -- and I mean the plural -- using disguises, just to set up this operation. Even today there are people who will testify that my false

identities are real -- that's how fooled they were. And not one thread leads from them to me. I've been planning this for years. And years."

"Your crime is remarkable in its comprehensiveness," said Wolfe. "I am impressed. But even if you are correct, you have made a grave error here in the endgame. I am surprised."

"An *error*?"

"A fatal one. I have recorded this conversation. I have your confession."

I flashed him that winning smile again. I *practiced* to perfect that winning smile. You have no idea how hard I worked. "Even if I believed you," I said, "which I don't, you'll never use the recording."

Wolfe pushed back his chair and eyed the door to the hall. "Surely you don't plan to kill me as well?"

"Of course not! For a genius, you can sometimes be a dunce. You won't send me to prison because if you do, you'll be out a primo factotum."

Wolfe blinked once. I took that to mean he was startled.

"It's simple," I said, "really. I didn't kill Archie because he was a callous twit. I mean, seriously! I could have just dumped him. No, I killed him because I wanted his job. And now I'll have it."

Wolfe was speechless.

"My," I said. "How often has *that* happened?"

"But why not? I'm smarter than Archie, and more knowledgeable. I have just as much charm, and I'm just as quick with my wits. I earned black belts in both Karate and Judo, and had training in hand-to-hand combat. You know why I killed Archie with a knife, and not poison, or something else? To show *you* I could do it. I knew you'd figure out it

was me, and I wanted you to know that I have what it takes.

"I'm an expert marksman. Or markswoman. I hired mercenaries to train me in explosives and automatic weapons. You say Archie could pick locks? I'm a duly licensed locksmith in the city of New York -- under an assumed identity, of course. All of this was under assumed identities.

"I can do everything Archie could do, as well or better. And cheaper -- you don't have to pay me at all. The last thing I need is your money."

"Indeed," said Wolfe. "If you don't want money, then what have you to gain?"

"The challenge. I need the challenge. After all, I have everything else."

"Indeed," said Wolfe again. It didn't seem as though all his powers of speech had returned. "You know I won't tolerate a woman living beneath my roof."

"Oh, gag me with a spoon. You think I'd give up my penthouse overlooking the Park to live...," I looked around, "...*here*?" Wolfe scowled. "I'll be here when you need me, but I sleep in my own bed."

Wolfe's scowl diminished. Then he grunted.

"Exactly," I said. "I knew you'd see things my way." I uncrossed my legs. Wolfe's eyes widened and he seemed about to leap up.

"Don't run to the kitchen!" I said quickly, as I stood. "I'm not putting the moves on you. But it's true," I purred, "that I'm not wearing any stockings." Sorry, I couldn't resist!

Then I went to Archie's chair, gave it a spin, and sat down. I sat back and closed my eyes. Oh, and I recrossed my legs.

"I broke Archie's shorthand code," I said. "I can even write it myself."

"What about your memory. Can you remember and recite long conversations?"

"Oh, that memory thing is *so* yesterday. I'm *wired*."

"You're wearing a recording device? They are detectable."

"I'm not *wearing* a recording device. I *am* one. The pickup is hooked to my cheekbone, which resonates with my eardrums. The recorder is implanted beneath and behind my right ear. The playback is a false molar in my jaw. Listen to this."

I parted my lips and tilted my head back a little, and we listened to Wolfe's voice say, "He may have indeed been a twit, but he meant more to me than any person still living."

"Astonishing," said the real Wolfe. "I didn't know such things were even possible."

"A great deal is possible when you have unlimited funds."

"Fritz," said Wolfe. "You will drive Fritz away. He will be in perpetual fear that you will marry me and assume control of the household."

"Marry *you*? I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but what woman would marry a fat neurotic like you? Fritz gives you too much credit.

"Fritz and I will have a talk. He just needs to understand that I'm here for the action. I'm not a barefoot-and-pregnant kind of girl. He'll come around."

Wolfe pushed a button on his desk. Fritz appeared in the doorway, and instantly frowned when he saw me in Archie's chair. I'd never seen Fritz frown before.

"Fritz, I will have beer," said Wolfe. "Miss Rowan?"

"Do you have bottled seltzer, Fritz, delivered by the seltzer man, the way we used to, in the old days?"

"Of course," said Fritz.

"I thought you would. I would love a squirt of seltzer... in a glass of milk."

Fritz left. I flashed my winning smile one more time.

"Don't do that!" exploded Wolfe.

"What?"

"Smile. Don't smile that way at me."

"Yes, Mr. Wolfe. I'll save that smile for clients. And suspects."

I looked at him, and he looked at me. Then I saw the right corner of his mouth go up a sixteenth of an inch.

"Satisfactory," he said.

THE END