



2-15-2018

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Recommended Citation

Luftig, Richard (2018) "Sinister," *Westview*: Vol. 33: Iss. 2, Article 42.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol33/iss2/42>

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Sinister

by Richard Luftig

I got tired of people asking me why I moved from Southern California where the sun always shines to Cincinnati where it's cloudy 284 days per year. After a few months of trying to explain, I'd just answer, "Because Cleveland was closed." Then, while they struggled to get their head around that, I'd just walk away.

But, I guess a more serious answer is required. It's just that it's so involved. My ten-year marriage tanked when my wife left me for another woman. She got half of everything as community property, then had the balls—every pun intended—to sue me, and won alimony. After that, I fell into a deep depression, had the obligatory bouts with alcohol, and lost two jobs in three years.

But that's just the prelude. How I ended up in Cincinnati is even more bizarre. It all came down to a dart. And even that had complications.

I decided that if I had any chance of getting my life back I needed to hit the rewind button. And that included moving to a new place where no one knew me or my past. From there, it was an easy step to ruling out California. I needed a place where I had no ties, where I wouldn't come face-to-face with bad memories at every street corner.

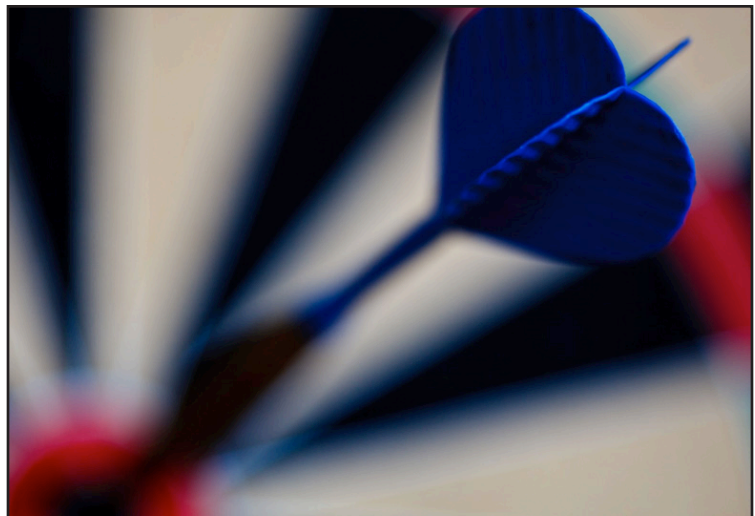
For the same reason, I ruled out the Southwest as well as Oregon and Washington. I considered moving to Saskatchewan but thought that learning Canadian might prove too difficult.

That left every place east of the Mississippi. So, I decided to blindfold myself in order to leave everything to chance and throw a dart at the eastern states. Wherever it struck was where I'd move.

Except, I'm left-handed.

If that seems like a non-sequitur, consider the map of the United States. On the left, near my throwing hand, was every western state that I vowed

to avoid. Considering that I had been the wildest left-handed pitcher in the history of Little League, I wasn't prepared to blindfold myself and throw a dart



across my body at the right side of the country. With my luck, I'd aim for New Hampshire and stick myself in the thigh.

The solution took a while, but it was really pretty simple: throw right-handed.

But, that was easier said than done. My first dart landed below the map and presumably would have hit Guatemala. My second landed in the Atlantic Ocean. The third dart did the trick. I hit Cincinnati spot-on.

You've probably heard about not making a wish because you might get what you wished for. That was the case with me and Cincinnati. I wanted a place where nobody knew or cared about my history. But, after a year in town, I was still invisible.

I found a place to live right away. Even though I was taken to the cleaners by my ex, I was able to scrape enough to get a one-bedroom apartment in Coryville on the west side of the city for seven hundred a month. That might sound like a lot, but compared to Los Angeles prices, the place was a steal.

And it was quiet—in fact, too quiet. Even after three months, I had talked to my landlord exactly once and still hadn't met my neighbors. I had heard that Midwesterners kept to themselves, but this was ridiculous. If I died in my apartment," no one would notice until I gave off a stink. By six months, I was seriously considering putting a sign on my door that said "Solicitors Welcome."

Finding a job wasn't hard. I majored in accounting in college. If jobs for CPA's were tough to find in Southern California, they were easy in Cincinnati. I had three job offers within a week. The only thing I could figure was that everybody in southwestern Ohio had tax issues.

Meeting women, however, was a problem. Part of it was my fault. I'm thirty-seven—that number represents both my age and waist size—and I pretty much look how you'd expect an accountant to appear: glasses that my ex-wife said made me look like an owl, brown hair graying at the temples, and height that was never going to scare anybody in the NBA. Plus, I was the only person from southern California not sporting a tan. Folks in my family had a tendency toward skin cancer, so I pointedly stayed out of the sun. Maybe that's why I found myself at home in the constant gray of Ohio.

Cincinnati is not exactly the singles capitol of the country. I'm not big on exercise: sit-ups, push-ups, any exercise with the word *up* defies the law of gravity, and I always obey the law. So, gyms were out. Churches were also out. The last time I went to confession was when I was in the sixth grade, and the priest told me I had a dirty mind.

That left bars. Maybe I just picked the wrong places, but it seemed like at every tavern I went to, the best-looking women had two missing teeth and three tattoos.

So, after three months, I was lonely. At six months, desperate. After a year of

my first Midwest winter alone, I was babbling in Icelandic.

Then, I read a newspaper story about a TGIF singles hookup at an upscale hotel along the downtown Riverfront District. I was so desperate that I decided to attend.

Big mistake. First, my attire. Remember, I'm from California. We wear jeans and polo shirts to the Grand Opera. But, every guy at the bar wore a suit and tie. Everyone was twenty-something, beautiful, with straight white teeth, and blond hair.

It was apparent—at least to me—that my open buttoned shirt, casual khakis, and receding hairline were not going to be big hits among the beautiful people of Cincinnati, all vying for hook-ups, nightcaps, and perhaps one-night stands.

I didn't even go inside.

What to do now? The thought of going back to my apartment and eating last night's pizza was unbearable. So was the alternative of wandering around the Riverfront alone.

Then I saw it. A sign in the hotel lobby: "Sinister Society of Cincinnati. See If You Qualify!" Under the sign, a woman sat on a metal folding chair at a small desk. There was a second, empty chair next to her. She wasn't knockout gorgeous, not in the way that the beautiful singles group I had just left were, but she was pretty with shoulder-length brown hair and light, almost transparent eyes, which were unfortunately hidden behind large glasses. The lower half of her body was hidden behind the desk so I couldn't see her legs, but she looked trim: not an hour-glass figure but still shapely. And, she looked a lot more natural and unmade-up than the women in the group I had just left.

I walked up to her desk. She was wearing a handwritten name tag that said "Sarah," a nice old-fashioned name, I thought, that seemed to fit her exactly. Above her name was a printed message: "Don't be shy. Go ahead, ask."

"Hello," I said. "My name's Bill Nelson."

"Glad to know you Bill," she said in a friendly voice. "How can I help you?"

"I'll bite," I said. "What's with the 'Sinister' name? You a bunch of Mafia members?"

She gave me a smile that seemed to contradict the Society's dangerous connotation. "Can't tell you," she said. "At least not now. If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

The thought crossed my mind that I was dealing with a nut case. But, she seemed so benign. And pretty. Besides, I assumed not just any whacko off the street could set up an information table in a five-star hotel downtown.

I shook my head. "So, let me get this straight. This is an information table, and you're wearing a name tag that says 'ask me,' but when I do, you can't answer me."

"Kind of. I can answer only if you qualify."

"Now I have to qualify," I said. "Jesus, your club sounds more secretive than the Masons. At least tell me this: are the members of this club witches or devil worshipers? I can find those easily enough on my own."

She laughed, a sexy kind of laugh that I liked. "Nothing as dark as that. Still, like they say in the credit card advertisement, membership has its privileges. You qualify, you get in. You get in, I explain. You game?"

What the hell, I thought. This was the most conversation I'd had with a good-looking female in six months. What did I have to lose? If I didn't qualify, I could go home. If I did qualify, and didn't like it, I could walk away. Besides, I wanted to get to know her better.

"What do I have to do?"

She reached for a copy of *Moby Dick*, opened the thick novel to page 518 then scanned the text for a few seconds. She pointed to a paragraph and gave me a blank piece of paper and a pen.

"Sit down and copy this."

Now, I knew she was nuts, but I sat down and began to copy the passage. Out of my peripheral vision, I could see her watching me intently.

It took me maybe two minutes to finish. "Done," I said and pushed the paper back to her. "Now what?"

She took out a magnifying glass. "Now, we score it." She carefully read what I had written, studying each of my written words.

Had I fallen in with a group of evil penmanship teachers? I was tempted to look around for the hidden camera telling me that this was all a joke for some comedy show, but I held off. Besides, there was a vague feeling gnawing at me that I couldn't quite define.

Then, it hit me. I wanted to pass the test.

She put a big red check mark on the top of the paper. "Okay, you passed part one."

"Part one? What is this, the SAT exam?"

She smiled. "Hey, you should feel proud. Only about ten percent of applicants pass round one. There are two parts. Pass the second, and you're in."

"And that would be...?"

"Deduce the meaning of part one."

I shook my head. "This is crazy. You guys are tougher than the CIA. Why would I spend my time trying to figure out part two?"

"Because you don't have better things to do with your time."

Now, I was getting a bit angry. "And you know this how?"

"By the fact that I saw you checking out the Friday night singles meet-up across the way. That you didn't go in tells me three things."

"Which are?" I asked.

"Elementary, my dear Watson. First, that you are single. Or you're cheating on your wife, but you don't seem the type. Second, you're shy and not very self-confident."

"And the third?"

"That you don't have much of a social life. None of these are pre-requisites for joining the Sinister Society, but they indicate that you might enjoy membership."

I shrugged. "Why not. But I still think you're out on a day pass from the mental hospital. I'll probably hear about your capture tomorrow on the morning news."

She laughed again. "If that's the case, then both of us had a hell of a night." She reached for a scrap of paper. "Here's my name and number. You figure out part two, and then we'll see."

I took her number and carefully placed it in my wallet. I knew this was insane, but I really wanted to solve the puzzle and qualify for membership. Actually, I didn't really give a damn about the club. I just wanted to see her again.

The bad news was that two weeks later I still wasn't any closer to solving the puzzle. The good news was that at least I had something to do with my free time.

I'd gone over our conversation dozens of times but had gotten nowhere. I checked out *Moby Dick* from the library and found the page that Sarah had me copy. That didn't solve anything.

In desperation, I read the book cover to cover. Then, I read all of the *Cliffs Notes* I could find. I tried to figure out what was sinister in the book. Perhaps Captain Ahab. Maybe the Great White Whale. But even if this were true, it still didn't give me any clues as to what I had to do to qualify for membership in the society.

I took Sarah's phone number out of my wallet at least twenty times. I wanted to call her. But, what would I say: that I was too stupid to solve the problem? That she should let me have membership anyway? If my goal was to impress her, that hardly sounded like a good plan.

It was a Friday night like most other Fridays, which meant I was going to be eating alone. My choices were also the usual: Chinese or Italian take-out while watching whatever banal reality show the networks were running.

For the record, I chose Chinese: General Tso's Chicken. I've often thought about who General Tso was and what he did to have a famous dish named after him, but I had about as much luck with that as solving the mystery of the Sinister Society.

I went to the restaurant to claim my order. The bill, with soup and egg roll, came to \$11.86. I hadn't gone to the ATM, so I was little short on cash. No problem.

I handed the cashier my Visa card, filled in \$2.50 for a tip and signed. Then, I stared at the receipt.

"Son of a bitch," I said, loudly enough for the people at the first three tables to hear.

I had left my cellphone at home. You know those radar signs the police put on surface streets, the ones that flash how fast you're going over the speed limit? Mine clocked me going sixty in a thirty-five. That's how much of a hurry I was in I was in to get back.

I opened the door of my apartment, threw the food cartons onto the kitchen table, and fished my cellphone out of my other pants. I punched in Sarah's number and texted the message: "*Moby Dick* my ass."

Her reply was almost instantaneous. "Who's this?"

Damn, I thought. Her caller ID wouldn't work for my cellphone. She probably thought I was a whacko stalker.

"This is Bill Nelson. I hope you remember me. We met a few weeks back at the Hyatt. You were manning the Sinister Society membership desk."

Again a quick reply. "Yes, I remember you. Have you solved part two of the test?"

"Absolutely."

"So, what is it?"

I paused and took a deep breath. What I was about to do was as far from my usual self as Los Angeles was from Cincinnati. With my luck, she'd disconnect, and I'd never hear from her again. Still, no risk, no reward.

I punched in the letters. "Uh-uh. You want to know if I've solved the puzzle, then have dinner with me?"

My screen remained blank. Thirty seconds, one minute. I had blown it for sure.

"Okay. Tomorrow night. But I pick the place. Do you know Marcello's in Mt. Washington?" I knew it. A nice family-owned restaurant at the east end of the city. Good food, moderate prices. Very public. A good place, especially for a woman who didn't know if her date was an axe murderer.

"Yeah, I know where it is."

This time her response was quick. "Make reservations for seven. But you better have the right answer!"

Seven o'clock couldn't come fast enough. I worried about what to wear, whether to order for the both of us, and what kind of wine she might like. I kept playing over the solution in my mind, alternately doubting myself and feeling confident



that I had found the right answer.

I arrived at Marcello's at six-thirty and took a chair facing the door. I had decided on a sport jacket, shirt, and tie. Of course, this was the wrong choice. Every guy in the place was wearing jeans and an open-neck shirt. Some were wearing shorts and sneakers. I determined to write the Chamber of Commerce suggesting that a pamphlet on correct social attire be issued to all out-of-state residents.

She arrived thirty minutes late. That would have been fine any other time, but with each passing minute I became more convinced that she was standing me up. When she entered the restaurant, she looked so pretty in her print dress that I instantly forgave her.

I didn't know if I should stand when she came to my table. I'd lost all confidence in knowing the Cincinnati Rules of Etiquette. But, I figured that being overly polite held less risk of being rude, so I stood.

She offered me her hand. It was warm and firm. A nice hand. I took it and tried not to be too affectionate in my grasp. No sense scaring her off even before dinner began.

To my surprise she gave me a kiss on the cheek before sitting down. It had been a long time since any woman had performed even this minor gesture, and it felt good.

The waiter came over with the bottle. "I took the liberty of ordering wine," I said. "I hope you like red."

"Oh, a man who takes charge." She swirled her glass and smelled the bouquet. I panicked. I hadn't been expecting a wine connoisseur.

She took a sip. "Wonderful," she said. "Thursday was a good year."

I must have had *panic* written on my face because she laughed. "I was only kidding. It's really quite good."

She ordered spaghetti and meatballs, my personal favorite. I ordered the same. We enjoyed our wine in silence for a few moments.

She put down her glass. "Okay," she said. "Put up or shut up time. What qualifies you for membership in the Sinister Society?"

I prayed one last time that I was right. "Amazingly simple," I said. "I'm left-handed."

"And *Moby Dick*?"

"A ruse, a red herring. You just needed to see if I wrote with my left hand. You could have given me the encyclopedia, and the result would have been the same."

She smiled. "Good for you. You're the first guy I ever had who got both parts right."

Our salads came, and I happily dug into mine. "So, what exactly is this Society? What do I win, and I hope it's not a trip to Buffalo. Winters are worse there than here."

"Let's save that until after our entrées arrive." She tore off a piece of bread. "Let me ask you: why do you think it's called the Sinister Society?"

I put down my fork. "You mean there's a part three to all of this?"

She laughed, "No, you passed. Consider it extra credit."

I thought but came up blank. "I don't have a clue."

"Did you take Latin in school?"

"No, German. Why?"

"I did. Left in Latin is *Sinestra*. Sinister. In the middle ages it was believed that people who were left-handed were the devil incarnate. Some were even put to death."

I shook my head. "I never knew that. So, is the group named because everybody is left-handed or because you're Satan worshippers?"

"Sorry. That is something that you're going to have to learn for yourself."



We sipped our wine. "You a gambling man?"

I was surprised. "I've been known to be. Why?"

"I'll bet you a second bottle of wine that you can't answer me a left-handed trivia question."

To tell you the truth, I didn't care if I won or lost. A second bottle would give me more time to spend with her. "Okay, I'm in."

"Four presidents since 1950 as well as one of the most famous child actors currently living in America and his mother are all left-handed. Who are they?"

I thought about it for thirty seconds but came up blank. "Jesus, who would know that? You win. Who are they?"

She giggled. "Boy, are you dumb. Ford, Bush the Senior, Clinton, and Obama."

"And the kid?"

"Bart and Marge Simpson."

"Hey, you cheated," I said. "They're cartoons."

She emptied her glass. "Too bad. Pay up fool."

Our dinners arrived. I watched Sarah begin on hers. Something bothered me as she ate but I could quite put a finger on it. Then it hit me. She was eating with her right hand.

"Are you ambidextrous?" I asked.

She laughed. "Yeah, I've always been a hard worker."

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter," I said. "Are you right-handed?"

She nodded. "Guilty as charged."

Now I was totally confused. "So how did you get into the Sinister Society?"

"I'm the founder. I can do anything I choose"

"I don't understand," I said. "You mean you're the president of the local chapter?"

"No, I mean I created it out of thin air. It doesn't actually exist."

"Excuse me?"

She looked into my eyes. "Boy, you really are slow. There is no such thing as the Sinister Society. I made the whole thing up."

I thought she might be teasing me, seeing if I was even more gullible than I appeared. But she appeared to be dead serious.

"Why in the world would you make up something like that?"

"To meet interesting guys," she said.

"Seems like a hell of a lot of trouble just to meet a man. What about the traditional ways? Too mundane for you?"

My questions seemed to anger her. "Oh, you mean like bars, gyms and online dating? Tell me, how's that been working for you?"

"Not so well," I admitted.

"Well, trust me, it's even worse for a woman. You'd be surprised at the kooks crawling out of the woodwork."

"And creating the Sinister Society works better?"

"Sure," she said. "I get to screen who I want to meet, maybe take it to the next level, all the while controlling the interview process because the poor guy thinks he's applying for membership in a club while I'm sizing him up. It's the perfect cover. If I don't like him I shoot him down for my make-believe membership on the spot. If he seems interesting, and if he solves the riddle, I might take it further. No matter what, I'm the one in control."

I had to admit, it was a pretty good plan. But one thing still confused me. “Ok, suppose I grant you that your crazy game made sense. But that doesn’t explain the left-handed angle. What’s with that?”

She sat silent, studying the wine at the bottom of her glass. “I walked out on my husband the day he broke my jaw.”

My mouth opened in surprise. “Jesus, that’s terrible. I’m so sorry. But what does that have to do with the whole left-handed business?”

“It has everything to do with it,” she said. “He was a bully and had a temper. I knew he was capable of violence. When he raised his hands, I was looking at his right. That’s the one I was worried about. I forgot that he was left-handed and that was the one he hit me with.

“Right then and there I swore that if I ever went with another guy, he’d have to be totally left-handed. That way if he was a son-of-a-bitch I’d never be sucker-punched again.”

I guess I shouldn’t have laughed. I mean, domestic violence is a terrible thing. But, I had to admit her prerequisite for future boyfriends was ingenious.

She smiled. “It’s okay to laugh. I have to admit my whole plan has been pretty scatterbrained,”

“No,” I said. “It’s ingenious. I mean, you’re nuts for coming up with it, but as they say, whatever works.”

The waiter came over and took our dessert order. I asked for another bottle of wine. “All right,” Sarah said. “Now you know everything about me. But I know nothing about you except that you’re left-handed, good with puzzles, and like to bet. Let’s start easy. Where are you from?”

“California,” I said, and held my breath.

“Really? How the hell did you end up settling in Cincinnati?”

I began by explaining how Cleveland had been closed.

