

THE DWELLING PLACE OF DEATH

By CLARK FROST

*Things Were Dull Around
Tom Westly's Lunchroom
—Till Business Got So Hot
It Burned the Place Down!*

TOM WESTLY looked up with quick interest as the couple came through the dripping rain to his mountain gas station and lunchroom. The girl was brown-eyed and pretty and about twenty. The man looked too old to be her husband, and—although he might have been either—too young to be her father. His grey tweeds were in want of a press, his whole appearance shabby in contrast to the girl's trim freshness. Westly placed his age at thirty-six.

They settled in a booth. The girl threw back her damp polo coat, and gave Tom a pleasant smile.

"Bacon and eggs—if you have them—and toast and coffee, please. Make the coffee black." She looked at her companion.

"The same suits me," he said briefly.

Fall rain drummed on the windows of the gas station as Westly prepared the food.

When he returned to their booth, the girl smiled at him.



The men got up. One of them held a revolver in his hand.

"We're lucky to find a place like this back here in the woods," she said.

He shrugged.

"It's wild enough. Lonely, too."

Her brown eyes swept his tall figure.

"You haven't lived here always?"

"Not always. My health broke down last year. Instead of finishing law school, I bought this place." He grimaced. "I'm healthy enough now, but I've got two thousand—every cent I own—tied up here. I was to finish school with that money and get started afterwards."

"Tough," said the man in shabby tweeds. "Can't sell the joint, eh?"

"No. Trouble is, it's not a year-round proposition."

The man looked at a card hung back of the counter.

"That your name?"

The card read, *Tom Westly*.

Westly nodded.

"When I was handling gas during the summer, a gas company made it for me."

The girl sipped her coffee.

"How far is it to Carter?" she asked. "Wouldn't somebody there take this over?"

"Not likely. It's fifteen miles of brush and timber and dirt road. Bad dirt road at this time of year."

"Well, some guys live out this way," remarked the man, looking around. "You stock some groceries."

"Mountaineers. They don't buy much. When the camps hereabouts are being used, I do fairly well." He paused. "The CCC boys built this road a couple of years back. Out beyond here, on State land, they put in shelters, fire-places and fixed up a regular camping grounds. In good weather, quite a few folks come out. But it's not what I thought it would be. In winter, a fellow can trap. That's about all."

"This is the first time we've been here, Mr. Westly," said the girl. "We're looking

for a camp site."

"You picked a wet day."

Westly stared through the dripping panes at the jackpines closing in on a wet dirt road. A grey curtain of rain cut off all view of Blackjack Ridge beyond.

"A guy was telling us about this section," the man said suddenly. "He said, telling us about it, there wasn't no better place in the State for a camp. Maybe you know him. Fellow name of Allister. He's got a place somewhere around."

WESTLY shook his head.

"No. I don't know anybody by that name."

"You might have the wrong name, Jim," suggested the girl softly.

"Maybe I have. This guy's tall and lanky, and maybe forty-five. His hair's black, turning gray. He's got a long chin, kind of."

"Lots of mountaineers could answer that description."

"I s'pose." The man shoved back his plate. "Where's the road go beyond here?"

"Ends a mile further. That's where the State camping grounds are. Some side roads fork into camps."

"Any folks at those camps now?"

"Not many. Most of 'em are closed from now until hunting season starts." Tom carried their dishes away. "Every now and then someone drives in. Sounds like a car coming now."

The man jerked erect. The girl ran a hand through her glistening chestnut hair and spoke in undertone to her companion. He nodded. She turned to stare through the wet panes.

A mountain mist swam among the jackpines. From somewhere out in it, the throb of a motor rose and fell, battling muddy grades.

She stood up.

"Mr. Westly, would you use me as a—

a waitress. I know you don't—"

"Use a *waitress*?" His eyes widened.

"She wants some practice," said the man.

"Yes," went on the girl. "I'm anxious for the practice. I'll work hard today—for several days—and pay you twenty dollars for the privilege."

Westly was silent.

"What's the catch?" he asked at length.

"There's no catch as far as you're concerned," said the man.

"I can use the money," said Westly. "But an offer like this—there's something loose somewhere."

The girl walked to the counter, leaving her own coat in the booth.

"Please," she said. The motor was close now, grinding in low on the slippery grade. She cast an anxious glance at the rain-beaded windows. "This means an awful lot!"

The car pulled in alongside the station then, and a man wearing a State trooper's uniform got out.

"My name's Gail Dalton. You can call me Gail," she said. She picked up a cloth and began to polish the counter.

THE cop came in. He gave a quick look around.

"Any strangers been here today, folks?" he asked.

"Just people we know. People from around here," said the girl brightly. "That's all, officer."

The cop stared at her a moment, then shrugged.

"The bank in Carter was robbed about noon. Two bandits. One big, one little. They got chased out this way." He paused. "I don't think they intended to beat it into the mountains, but we turned them off the highway, and they wrecked their car."

"I didn't see them," said the girl. Her brown eyes were on Tom Westly as she

spoke.

"Likely they've turned on a side road," said the cop. "I'll try a few. I can't get back to Carter for a while anyhow. A bad slide blocked the road near town right after I got through."

He nodded, and left.

Tom turned on the girl hotly. "I don't like this. You want me to go to jail with you? I will, if they think I'm backing your story."

"No. I don't want that at all. Honestly."

"Then why did you lie to that cop?"

"Did I? There weren't any strangers here, were there?"

"You two."

She hesitated.

"Well—honestly, you'll be clear."

"It's not that I'm afraid of trouble, but you see, I've still got a crazy notion that some day I can get my money out of this place and return to law school," he said. "If I get in a jam with the police, that'd be out. I'd never be admitted to the bar."

"I hope you can return, Mr. Westly. Really I do. You—"

The man in the booth sat erect. He threw a warning glance at Gail Dalton. A sloshing sound came from outside. Two figures appeared, gray and furtive in the mist and rain.

Gail leaned toward Tom Westly.

"I'm going through with this!"

"You bet she is," said the man in grey tweeds. He lifted a heavy automatic, then dropped it into a pocket, keeping his hand there.

The two men came in, shaking water from their dripping clothes. They were plastered with mud. One was young and small, about thirty, with a mean twist to his lips. The other was older, taller and leaner. They stared grimly around the room, then chose a booth.

Gail approached them.

“Something for you gentlemen?”

The younger one looked at her with a fixed stare.

“Yeah. Coupl’a hamburgers—in a hurry. An’ tell us where this mud trail leads.”

“Why, it ends at the State camping grounds about a mile beyond here,” she said.

“Jeez!” He looked disconcerted. “Well, get them hamburgers goin’.”

She went to an ice box, removed two pats of raw meat, and dropped them expertly on a hot skillet. Tom Westly went to her side. His eyes were hard, but he said nothing.

One of the men called to him.

“You got a phone?”

He shook his head.

The other man, the older one, pointed to a shelf back of the counter.

“He’s got a radio.”

“It’s busted,” Tom told him. “Been that way for a week.”

“You heard any word from Carter today?” asked the man narrowly.

“Heard there was a bad slide this side of town.”

“Yeah, we seen it,” growled the other.

“You fellows walking?” asked Westly curiously.

“That’s our business, chum,” snapped the younger man.

“Who told you about the slide?” asked the older man suddenly.

“A fellow came by a while ago,” replied Westly easily. “Said he couldn’t get into town. Road’s blocked.”

“Yeah, it’s blocked.”

THE lean man walked to the counter, bought a pack of cigarettes. He turned to stare at the man in grey tweeds as he ripped the pack open. Then he walked to the man’s booth.

“You from these parts, chum?”

“Yeah,” said the man.

“How can a guy get outta here by car—without goin’ back to Carter?”

“He can’t, brother.”

“Hear that, Ben?” said the lean man to his companion. “This guy says we gotta go back to Carter.”

“The road’ll likely be cleared soon,” said Westly.

“Yeah?” Ben, the younger man, got to his feet and went to the door. He stared out at the falling rain until Gail brought the hamburgers. He turned to the older man then.

“C’mon, Mac, let’s eat anyhow.”

Again there was a sloshing sound outside. The men in the booth froze. Through the curtain of rain, a horse and rider came into view. The rider slid from his wet saddle, tied his horse under a pine and entered the lunchroom.

He was tall, with a slouching gait. Water trickled from his shapeless felt hat. He stood inside the door, took off a slicker, and knocked water from his hat.

“Hullo, Bert,” said Westly.

The tall man grinned and looked around.

“Lots of business for a wet day, Tom.” He slouched to the counter. “Anything out from town yet?”

“Won’t be today,” Westly told him. “Road’s blocked. A bad slide.”

“Shucks!” The man drew out a pipe and stuffed tobacco in it. He turned suddenly to Gail. “Hullo there, Miss. You Tom’s helper?”

“Yes,” said Gail.

“That’s good. Tom, he can use a pretty helper like you, I bet.” He laughed. “She looks mighty efficient, Tom.”

Gail flushed under his scrutiny.

“I try to be,” she said quietly.

Ben spoke up with a scowl.

“Where’d *you* come from, chum?”

Bert gave him a searching stare, then

grinned.

"In outta the rain, young fella. That shows more sense'n some folks have."

"Yeah? What d'ya mean by that, wise guy?"

"I mean when I wanta keep outta trouble, I get clear away from it." He grinned again, showing a set of strong yellow teeth, and turned to Westly. "The bank was robbed in Carter today, Tom. Coupl'a fellows stuck it up and got away with ten thousand dollars."

There was a heavy silence. Mac, the lean man, broke it.

"Where'd you hear that, rube?" he rasped, lowering his hamburger.

"I got a radio in my cabin," replied Bert. He walked across the lunchroom, humming a tune, and dropped a nickel in Westly's juke box. He kept time to the music with one foot, grinning and puffing on his pipe. Then he turned to the counter, spoke to Gail.

"My name's Bert Ginter. I like good-lookin' girls. 'Specially waitresses."

GINTER was well past forty. Gail wasn't impressed.

"I stay over at the old Mosby camp, three-four miles from here," Ginter went on. "Tom gets stuff for me off the meat truck from town. I guess I'll be seein' you often. If you're over my way, stop in and say hello."

"You must be an old-timer around here," said Mac sarcastically. "Maybe you can tell us how to get outta this God-forsaken country. Ain't there some way of gettin' through with a car on some trail without goin' back to Carter?"

Ginter chuckled.

"There's lots of old trails, logging trails. They end nowhere. This is bear country. Just bear country."

"Bear country!" Ben hooted derisively. "Whaddya tryin' to feed us, Rube?"

"I seen two yesterday," said Ginter gently.

"Get out! Don't tell me bears is that plentiful in Pennsylvania. Maybe in the Rockies—"

"Rockies, my eye!" Ginter broke into another chuckle. "Except in parks out there, where you ain't allowed to kill 'em, I guess there ain't a Rocky Mountain State with as many bears as Pennsylvania's got. 'Course, ours is all black bears, but they's bears just the same."

"That's right," agreed Tom Westly. "During hunting season, there's upwards of a thousand bear killed in this State. You take Colorado, say, and they're doin' good if they shoot a hundred. Lots of people don't know it. I didn't. Not before I came here."

"We ain't got only bear," said Ginter. "We got the best deer huntin', too. Why, almost half the deer killed in the whole danged country come from Pennsylvania and Michigan alone. That's no lie, either."

Mac shrugged indifferently, his interest flagging.

"Well, we gotta get outta here."

Westly wanted to keep the conversation going.

"Not so many years ago," he said, "the State took away the limit on bears in some counties here. This was one of 'em. Bears got so plentiful that farmers gave free lodging to any hunters who'd come in and shoot them. That was in the early twenties. Seems queer in a heavily-populated State like Pennsylvania, but the whole thing is, we've got population that's mighty thick in spots, and mighty thin in other sections."

Outside, the mist closed in, the rain fell harder. Westly lit an oil lamp. The man in tweeds appeared to be asleep.

"Bears or no bears," snarled Ben, "we ain't stayin' no longer. C'mon, Mac."

He was on his feet. There was a

revolver in his hand.

"Who's got the keys to the car outside?" said Mac.

A heavy silence greeted him.

"C'mon!" growled Ben. "We ain't got all day. Who's got them keys?" He looked at Ginter. "I know it ain't you, Rube. An' I suppose the wreck we seen in back of here belongs to you, Westly. That means this other guy's got 'em."

Mac went over to the booth where the man in grey tweeds sat. The man was sprawled in his seat with his head thrust forward.

"Wake up," said Mac, shaking him. "Snap out of it, chum."

"He's sure gettin' hisself a good sleep," said Ginter.

Mac shook him violently. Westly straightened, and ran to the booth, his eyes wide.

"Wait a minute," he said hoarsely. "This fellow's not sleeping. There's a knife in him. Lord, he's dead!"

A frightened gasp came from Gail. She ran to the booth. Mac flung her back.

"You keep outta this," he snarled.

"You've killed him," she said, her eyes wide. "You've *killed* him!" Her voice trembled on a shrill note. "*You've killed him!*"

Westly got her by the shoulders.

"Take it easy, Gail."

She began to shriek.

"He's been killed. He's been killed, and it's my fault!"

Westly led her, sobbing, to another booth. She buried her face in her hands.

"Man's dead," said Ginter. "Can't do nothin' about that. Soon's the road's clear, the coroner can get out."

"See if the stiff's got the keys to the coupe outside, Mac," said Ben grimly. "We ain't stayin' in this mess."

Rain beat insistently against the panes. The mist among the jackpines thickened to

a fall night's gloom. The oil lamp back of the counter gleamed yellow. The whine of a motor sounded near at hand.

"*Get that key!*" shouted Ben, his mouth beginning to work nervously.

Mac straightened with a key case in his hand. The motor whined loud. A black shape loomed through the mist outside, its wheels spinning on the slick surface of the road. It came to a stop.

Ben looked through the window.

"It's a cop, Mac," he said. He dropped a hand to his pocket. "The first guy to crack off gets a belly full of lead."

Mac and Ben ran back of the counter and crouched on the floor.

A State trooper came in, the same one who had stopped earlier. He hesitated inside the door.

His eyes came to rest on Tom Westly.

"Has anyone been out from Carter yet?" he asked.

"No."

The officer looked sharply at Westly, then at Ginter. "Where are you from?"

"I'm livin' at the old Mosby place," said the tall man.

"You seen any strangers around?"

"No."

THE trooper shrugged. He looked toward the grey-suited man.

"Your friend's asleep, huh?" He winked at Gail then, and moved to the door.

"If you need any gas," said Westly steadily, "I'll let you get it yourself. Too wet out. I'd get soaked in a minute."

"Yeah? Yeah, I guess it's plenty wet. Well, I'll help myself to five gallons. Here's a buck. Right?"

"Thanks," said Westly.

The trooper went outside. Several minutes later, his car roared away in the gloom.

"You was wise," said Mac, standing

up. "Now we're goin'."

"You'll be held up by the slide," said Westly. "As soon's you try to get through, they'll nab you."

"No, they won't," said Ben. "We're takin' your girl along for the ride, see? Mac'll be curled up in the rumble. She'll ride up front with me. They'll be lookin' for two guys. Not one guy and his judy. If she hollers, I'll blast her quick."

Mac grinned, and gathered up Gail's polo coat. "Put this on, sister." He seized her, forced her coat on, then shoved her ahead of him to the door.

"So long, suckers," he said.

Ben moved with them, holding his automatic.

Westly leaned against the counter, his eyes narrow. Under his foot, he felt a can. He glanced down. It was a can of soup. He swung his foot against it. It rolled along back of the counter and crashed into a cracker tin across the room.

Ben's eyes jerked toward the noise. With a quick underhand throw, Westly sent another can hurtling from a pile on the counter to Ben's face, then jumped for an old shotgun in a corner.

It was a fast move. It nearly met success. But as the can struck Ben, his revolver crashed, and Westly stumbled against a table, blood trickling from his face.

The table went over. The lamp went with it. There was a crash. The lamp went out. The room was plunged in darkness. Then a red light roared up, and flames from the shattered lamp spread along the floor.

Ben and Mac rushed through the door, dragging Gail with them. Westly, on his hands and knees, crawled around one corner of the counter. Smoke rolled up. Flames were snapping and crackling in all directions.

Westly saw Ginter leap for the

doorway. He started after him. Then he stopped, raced back, and seized the limp body of the grey-suited man. With his heavy burden, he struggled through the smoke-and-flame-filled room. As he reached the door, a heavy blow sent him spinning.

He went to his knees, dazed. Behind him flames roared up in a red inferno. He groped about, located the form of the dead man, shouldered it again and staggered for the door.

Sweat and blood dripped from his face. His jaw felt as though it were on fire. Smoke clogged his throat and nostrils. Tears streamed from his eyes. He fought his way to the door, fell through it and felt wet air blowing into his hot face.

Getting to his feet, Westly dragged his limp burden away from the blazing lunchroom. Then he remembered something. He reached into the man's coat and pulled out a heavy automatic.

The rain beat into his bloody face as he ran forward.

THE coupe started out with a roar. Across the road, a man rose, shouting a command. A revolver crashed and crashed again. Westly raised the automatic. It bucked in his hand. A tire sagged on the coupe. It skidded sideways, slid across the road, plowed into a half-filled ditch, sending up a spray of muddy water, and stalled.

A man leaped from it. His pistol blazed. From the dark, tree-lined road's edge came another blast of revolver fire. The man by the car pitched on his face in the mud.

Tom Westly ran across the road. The State trooper was already bending over him. He straightened.

"This guy's dead. Where's the other one?" he said.

"Locked in the rumble," said Westly.

The trooper grinned.

"Is *he* going to be surprised?" He paused. "I parked down the road, and walked back. I was almost too late."

"You got my signal, though?"

"Sure. When you asked me to get gas, I knew there was something wrong. I'd already seen your sign saying you weren't carrying gas after September fifteenth. It was fast thinking. These guys were inside then?"

"Yes," said Westly. "They were under the counter with a pistol on us."

"That's what I figured. *Say*, you've been shot!"

"Creased. I'm all right." Westly turned to the car.

Gail got out of it. She sat down on a wet stump, sobbing quietly in the lurid glare of the burning lunchroom.

Westly sat down beside her.

"It's all right," he said. "Everything's all right."

"They killed Jim," she choked. "They killed him." She leaned against Westly.

He patted her slim shoulder.

"Don't think about it now, Gail."

"I—I've got to!" Her voice was a fierce whisper. "Don't you see? He—Jim—did me a great favor by coming here. *Why* did they kill him?" Her hands clenched. Her face lifted to his. "I've got it now! One of those men—"

"Yes, Gail?"

She seized his arm. Her words came in a rush.

"My name isn't Gail Dalton. It's Gail Leahy. Rodney Leahy—my brother—perhaps you've read of his—his disappearance?"

Westly shook his head.

"He vanished two weeks ago. He was carrying a lot of negotiable securities for his firm. He's bonded, of course. But he's gone. The police think he stole the securities. Maybe he did. He left a note

saying he did. That's why I don't want to be recognized by anyone. A policeman, or anyone."

"You came here to see your brother?"

"I think my brother's near here. I think a man by the name of Allen Allister is with him. I wanted to stay in your lunchroom for a few days. Jim thought I'd be almost certain to see him, or get some word of Rodney, my brother. He was our only clue. He was with Rodney the night before Rodney disappeared. They met in a saloon, and left together."

"Would you know Allister if you saw him?"

"No. That's where Jim came in. He was a bartender in the saloon where Allister met my brother. Jim had known Allister in prison. Allister was there for forgery. When they talked in the saloon, Jim learned that Allister was living in the mountains here. After the story broke, Jim came to me, told me of this. He had been a friend of Rodney's."

"Well," said Westly slowly, "he must've found Allister."

She looked up quickly.

"But those robbers, neither of them answer Allister's description."

"No, but Ginter does."

GAIL drew a deep breath. She began to tremble.

"Ginter! I never thought of him!" She pressed Tom's arm. "There he is now, talking to that State policeman. What will we do?"

"We've got to handle this carefully." He got to his feet, hailed the two men. They were standing near Jim's body, and talking about the murder.

"Who killed him?" asked Westly.

"Why," said the State trooper, "Mr. Ginter says he don't know which of the two bandits did it. What's your idea?"

"This fellow was a bartender from the

city. He recognized a former cellmate in my lunchroom. The cellmate killed him.”

“Good at readin’ a dead man’s mind, ain’t you, Tom?” said Ginter. “Which of the two bandits would the cellmate be?”

“Allen Allister.”

Ginter’s eyes drew down. He ran a hand over his long chin.

“Think you can prove that, Tom?”

“Easy to prove who the cellmate was. Easy to prove who bought the hunting knife that did the job. That ought to sew it up.”

“And the motive. Tom? You’re a law student—you know there’s gotta be a motive.”

“Miss Leahy knows the motive.”

The tall mountaineer took a half step forward. His eyes glittered under the wet brim of his shapeless hat.

“We might even find a cabin full of negotiable securities to help out.” added Westly.

“What’re you guys talkin’ about?” said the cop.

“I forgot to tell you,” said Ginter. “This fella’s read law and knows more’n a judge about crime.” He grinned, and rubbed his long chin once more. “I’ve got somethin’ to show you that you ain’t thought of, Tom. It’s in my saddle bag.”

Ginter walked toward the jackpine where his frightened horse was tugging at its tie rope in the glare of the burning building.

“Watch it!” cried Westly. “He’s the murderer, and he’s got a gun boot on that saddle!”

“Wait a minute, Ginter,” called the State trooper, alert.

Ginter leaped for his horse. He yanked a 30-30 free from its gun boot. The State trooper’s revolver roared, its flashes making lurid streaks in the misty gloom. The horse reared high. Ginter’s rifle slipped from his hands, and he fell forward

on a bed of wet pine needles.

“Some night!” said the State trooper grimly. “Now what about this cabin full of negotiable securities, Westly?”

“I guess we’d better go there,” said Tom with a regretful look at Gail. “Maybe everything’s going to be all right.”

The trooper’s car wound through the woods on an old logging trail, rain driving against its windshield. The old Mosby cabin was dark. Westly struck a match and lit a lamp.

YELLOW rays fell on a young man with a haggard face and feverish-bright eyes.

“Gail!” he cried. “My God, Gail!” He saw the State trooper then, and his eyes grew round. “Where’s Allister? You’ve got him? I’m glad—glad this is over at last.” He stood up. “You can take me; I don’t care.”

“Tell us about it,” suggested Westly. “How did you happen to fall in with Allen Allister?”

Rodney Leahy grimaced.

“I met him in a saloon. I was drunk. I must’ve told him about my job, for the next day he hailed me while I was carrying some bonds. He offered me a drink. I was feeling punk, and like a fool I took it. A Mickey Finn, I guess.

“The next thing I knew, I was up here in this cabin with Allister and the bonds. He didn’t know how to get rid of me, so he brought me along. Anyhow, by the time I came to, I was hooked. I didn’t know what to do, so I just stayed here with him. He told me the cops were looking for me.”

“They were,” said Westly. “They had a note you’d signed, admitting the theft.”

“I didn’t sign any note!”

“Probably not. They had it just the same.” Westly looked at Gail. “Didn’t you say Allister was a forger? You know, if I were a lawyer, I’d like to handle this case.

A forged note. Your brother held here under duress. I think it's a cinch. There won't be anything to it. We can prove Ginter and Allister are one and the same."

She put a slim hand on Westly's arm.

"We'll never be able to thank you enough. I—I wish you *were* going back to the city with us, Tom. To study law," she added in some confusion.

"Maybe you'd better turn to law," said the State trooper. "Your lunchroom's gone. Have insurance?"

"Not a penny."

"Well, your loss can't be more than a couple of thousand. I guess the bank and the bonding company, between them, will be tickled to take care of it and call it a day."

"You think so?"

"I *know* so."

Tom Westly grinned.

"In that case, I guess I'll go back to the city with you, Gail."