How Do You Plead Miss Pruitt?

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Abstract

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AGNES stared blankly at the fuzzy, unfamiliar ceiling above her. Rubbing a night of sleep from her eyes with a fist of knuckles, she stretched the cramps from her lanky frame in unison with a clearly audible yawn. Her long arm reached across the bed, and her hand fumbled on the night stand searching for a pair of glasses. The room came into focus as she placed her bifocals on her more than ample nose. A nice enough room, she thought. Not plush but nice as hotel rooms go. And clean. The bed must be made for midgets, though. Her body ached. Stretching for a second time to unkink herself, she sprawled under the tangled sheet.

She lay there, thinking about getting up and dreading the thought. Late morning sun slid through the half-opened venetian blinds. With a turn of the head, she ignored it. Her eyes fell on the fat blue brochure that rested on the night stand: See Wonderful New York City. Well, she didn't want to see it: And yet here she was, and would be, for one week.

There had been no way of knowing that she would be the one to win. How many people had signed their names to their grocery tapes and stuffed them into the box every week? Probably hundreds. They all wanted to win. With Agnes it was a habit, just something she did. Most of the time she didn't even know what the prize was. She entered every contest in town, knowing that some dumpy housewife would win.

With a groan, she rolled over and buried her face, glasses and all, in the pillow. Mr. Ross had been sympathetic; but, as he put it, his hands were tied. No, she could not receive cash instead: No, she could reject her prize: Couldn't she understand that people would think that the contest had been a hoax? And so, in reality they had not given her a trip, they had forced her to come.

It wasn't that she didn't like New York. She was frightened of all cities. Even the air was strange. Breathing it
seemed to change her. In the city, Agnes wasn’t Agnes Pruitt at all; she was a stranger. With a shudder she recalled the time in Chicago when she almost bought a pair of contact lenses. Everyone in Quincy would have thought she had gone stark raving mad. The mere thought of it was ridiculous.

Arching her back and pushing her chest up, she propped her elbows on the bed and cupped her chin in the heels of her hands. She stared at the pillow beneath her, wondering what was scheduled for the afternoon. Mr. Ross had arranged for the hotel to plan her tours and provide transportation and tickets for her convenience. The Guggenheim and United Nations were “musts,” he said. Everyone in Quincy would be expecting pictures and exciting stories. Her head sagged slightly; a few strands of grey were beginning to invade her short, sparse crop of dishwater hair.

A bit of writing on the pillow caught her attention. Her thick glasses magnified a tag that protruded from the pillow case directly under her. **DO NOT REMOVE UNDER PENALTY OF LAW.** Agnes leaned on one elbow to free a hand and pulled the tag further from under the case. Just as she thought. It was attached to the pillow itself. She stared at the tag for a long time, contemplating the warning it held.

She wondered what the penalty could be. $5000? Five years? Both? Surely it wouldn’t be that stiff for such a small crime. And anyway how could they possibly find out if anyone took off the ugly tags? Now, that was a thought: There was absolutely no way for them to ever know: Never in all her life had she heard of any type of pillow checker. Agnes stared at the tag for a long time. She fingered the stiff cloth and read the words printed on it once more. **DO NOT REMOVE UNDER PENALTY OF LAW.** With one swift movement, she yanked the tag free.

Holding onto it so tightly that her knuckles were beginning to yellow, she noticed that her hands and face were perspiring. Up she jumped from the bed, untangling her long cotton nightie from her ankles and still clutching onto the evidence. Quickly she surveyed the barren room. Now, the question of what to do with it. Where to hide the sinister piece of cloth?

The wastebasket! Of course. She dumped the small accumulation of trash onto the carpet and deposited the tag in
the bottom. Then, after replacing the refuse, she gazed into the container. Suddenly she realized what a perfectly stupid place it was to hide anything. They would look in the waste-basket first thing. Where would any normal person put something he wanted to get rid of?

Again she scanned the room. Her eyes hovered on the bathroom door. No, not the toilet. She remembered the time she and Cousin Blanche had tried to smoke in the bathroom when they were thirteen. They had tried to flush the discarded cigarettes down, but they refused to vanish. Up they would pop after each flush and bob on the surface. Finally Agnes had been forced to scoop them out and bury them in the flower bed. No more of those tricks for her. She pursed her lips distastefully at the memory and continued to inspect the room.

Her wandering eyes were arrested by a package of hotel matches lying on top of the dresser. Fantastic! With one giant step, she moved to grab the match book. The unpleasant odor of sulfur enlarged her nostrils. Placing the cloth in an ashtray, Agnes watched as the tiny flame devoured the evidence. Soon the words were only a memory. As a precaution, she mingled the ashes with her finger to prevent any possibility of identification.

Back she padded, barefoot, to the edge of her bed and sat down. Well, now, that was done. She felt relieved. It was as though the world were a better place now that such petty restrictions had been dealt with. She felt like a regular freedom fighter—a Paul Revere, a Barbara Fritche. She was someone important. She began to wonder how many tags like the one she had destroyed were still at large.

At once she was on her feet again. She grabbed the other pillow, but no tag protruded from that one. She snatched off the case, and out it popped. DO NOT REMOVE UNDER PENALTY OF LAW. With her free hand she ripped off the notice. Her eyes scrutinized the bed, seeking more hiding places.

Agnes threw down the pillow and tugged at the bed covers. Somewhere under them she was sure to find more prohibitive messages. Rip. The mattress pad was liberated. Another on the mattress itself. Rip.

Agnes fought an impulse to proceed to the next room. She must be careful, though. The law, as so often the case, was not on her side. She needed to think for a minute. Agnes
slumped into a chair near the bed and gazed at the three additional tags that she held cupped in her hands. She glanced up at the disheveled room and smirked. The maid would probably suspect her of having an affair. The maid. The soundless words echoed within her mind. How could the maid help but notice that the tags were missing when she made up the room? Undoubtedly, she was trained to report such cases. Agnes knew she must devise a plan of some sort. The question was what.

Her head began to pound as she pushed herself up from the chair onto her trembling legs. Pacing rapidly back and forth in front of the bed, she stared at the fistful of tags. It would be insanity to burn all three. With the methods of crime detection now days, the ashes of that many could be chemically analyzed and used as evidence against her. But somehow she must permanently rid herself of them. Her mind reviewed the dozens of mysteries she had read and seen on television over the years. The river trick never worked. Passing them off to someone else was beneath her dignity. Suddenly an idea occurred to her.

She strode to the dresser and opened the top drawer. Withdrawing a sheet of stationery, an envelope, and a ball-point, Agnes smiled. She addressed the letter: Miss Agnes Pruit, 309 Elm Avenue, Quincy, Illinois. Carefully she folded the sheet of paper and placed it and the tags inside the envelope. Her tongue ran along the foul-tasting glue, and she pressed the back firmly to insure that it sealed. Now, to find her purse. She had put it somewhere last night. Oh, yes. Agnes bent down on her hands and knees beside the bed and reached into the darkness. Her bones creaked a bit as she straightened up and eased onto the bed. Unfastening her bag, she hastily opened her wallet. This was not the first time she could pat herself on the back for having the foresight to tuck a couple of stamps away for emergencies. She moistened the back with her tongue tip as she returned to the envelope lying on the dresser. There. With direct aim, she pressed Washington’s picture into the right hand corner. She patted the letter with her bony hand and tilted her head just a little.

She gazed into the mirror at the reflection of her devastated bed. Turning quickly, Agnes moved toward it. With deft movements, she re-inserted the pillow in its jacket and made the bed. The solution had been easy. The maid
wouldn't need to make up the room and, therefore, there would be no way of her discovering the torn tags. Perfect!

Humming a few bars of "Mocking Bird Hill," Agnes shed her nightie and slipped into the shower. The warm spray of water dissolved her troubles and relaxed her tense muscles. She'd worry about the self-addressed letter when she got home.

Agnes patted some powder onto her shiny face and peered into the mirror at the lines that had recently begun to show on her face. She patted a little more powder on them, but still they remained. Well, she wasn't a teenager anymore. In fact, she would be forty-seven next month. No use trying to hide what was obvious. She glossed a bit of lipstick on quickly and walked to the closet. The navy suit would be just the thing for today. Quite proper, she thought.

Dropping her key inside her purse, she picked up the letter and walked through the door. Before closing it, she glanced back. Fine, fine. The room looked just fine.

She stopped at the elevator doors and pressed the down button. Then she carefully slipped her letter into the mail shoot and watched as it slid behind the glass out of sight. Well, that was that. Good riddance to bad rubbish, she chuckled. The metal doors slid back with a clank, and Agnes stepped into the cubicle with a warning to watch her step.

The coffee shop was quite crowded when Agnes entered. She looked around and saw a plump woman motioning to her from a table.

"My name is Virginia Olmstead. You're welcome to share this table if you don't mind company."

"Thank you. You're more than kind." Agnes sat down with the lady. She was in the mood for company. Since her arrival last night, she really hadn't talked to anyone except the desk clerk, if he counted. So who said all New Yorkers were cold people, she wondered.

Blushing faintly as her stomach growled, Agnes realized how hungry she was. "A ham sandwich on wheat toast, apple pie, and black coffee, please."

"Are you visiting here in New York?"

"Why yes. I won a contest at our local supermarket . . ." Agnes found herself telling Virginia everything. Some people were just easy to talk to. "And then I couldn't stand
it any longer. I felt as though I had to tear those tags off.” Somehow the conversation had turned. She had begun confessing the events of the morning’s crime to the stranger. “I decided to burn the first one, but I sent the remaining three to myself through the mail.” What was she doing? It was as though she couldn’t control herself.

“Well, all of us do foolish things at times.” Virginia raised her eyebrows and smiled at her as she sipped her coffee. “But you haven’t told me your name.”

Agnes fidgeted with her food uneasily. Her mind raced ahead of her mouth. “My name is Agnes . . . Agnes P-Porter.” She felt a deep burning sensation creeping through her body, up her neck toward her face. Never had she lied before. Never about her name, at least. Agnes Porter. Not a bad alias, she mused.

Finishing her lunch, she squinted at the woman beside her. Although she looked innocent enough, appearances could be deceiving. Beneath the layers of fat and the jolly contenance, there probably lurked a warped mind.

Agnes gulped her coffee. She had to get out of there and quick. She fumbled in her wallet for a tip. “Listen, about what I was saying, forget everything. It was a joke.”

She felt the woman’s eyes on her as she strode to the cashier. Her knees were shaking again. How could she have been so stupid as to admit her crime to a perfect stranger? She deserved to be caught. Pushing against the heavy glass door, she moved out into the bustling sidewalk crowds.

As she was swept along without a destination, her mind became a court room in which she was on trial.

“And now the court will hear the case of the People vs. Agnes Pruit. Miss Pruit, how do you plead to the charge of destroying printed matter required by law to be attached to certain merchandise?”

“Guilty, sir, guilty. Throw the book at me,” she begged. “I am at the court’s mercy.”

“Miss Pruit, we have for your identification exhibits A and B. These ashes were found in your hotel room and this letter was intercepted by the postal department of the city. Do you recognize the objects before you, Miss Pruit?”

“Yes. Yes. They’re mine,” she wept.

“And now the first witness for the People. Mrs. Virginia Olmstead, will you please take the stand?”

“Well, it was Monday, August 15th, when I first met the
accused. She was searching for a table at the coffee shop, and I asked her to share mine . . .”

Agnes halted with a jolt. Blocking her path across the intersection was a policeman. Blue uniform filled her eyes. She wheeled around and darted through the oncoming herd into the nearest department store. Once inside the door, she turned to see if she was being followed. No uniform in sight.

She began to relax, feeling a bit safer in the store. Her pulse was still racing, though, as fast as ever when she stepped onto the escalator that moved towards the second floor. Too slow. Too slow. She began to walk up the moving stairs past riders who stood like statues.

Relax, she told herself, as she browsed among the aisles. Just relax. As she passed the notions counter, an idea occurred to her. She purchased a spool of thread, a package of needles, and a seam ripper, and then made her way to the household department.

Not many people around, thank goodness. She slithered among the merchandise, keeping an eye out for clerks and floor watchers. Finally, she came to the pillows. With a quick stroke, she cut two tags and slipped them into her suit pocket. Then sauntering over to the bedding, she slashed two more and pocketed them. Wonderful! She had all four now. Brilliant idea!

Slowly she moved toward the down escalator and stood motionless on the steps. No need to call attention to herself now by hurrying. No need to act suspiciously. Easy does it. She was nearly at the exit.

Agnes swirled out of the store through the rotating doors and into the bellowing noise of the street. Faced by the labyrinth of sidewalks and alleyways, she panicked. Which way should she turn? Her journey from the hotel had been un plotted like the path of a sleepwalker. Searching for a landmark, she was jostled towards the corner by pedestrians. Immediately she recognized the intersection and the uniformed sentinel still on guard. With a jerk, she turned and headed the opposite direction.

Perspiration tingled on her forehead and upper lip as she strode past a dozen stores and theatres. Still clutching onto her package, she awkwardly fumbled with the buttons of her jacket. On she marched, feet throbbing, in the suffocating heat. Surely the hotel wasn’t so far away. She won-
dered it she had missed a turn or possibly left by the wrong
exit.

Passing a drugstore window which displayed postcards
of the city, Agnes made a mental note to buy some to send
home. She’d do that later—maybe tomorrow—but not now.
It was urgent that she return to the hotel immediately.
Reaching into her suit pocket, her fingertips touched the tags
and counted all four. The confirmation soothed her.

Ahead, across the intersection, she caught sight of the
hotel marquee and began to trot toward it. Just before
reaching the entrance, she slowed, patted her hair, and tugged
at her suit. Having composed herself, she walked into
the lobby avoiding both the main desk and the elevators. All
she needed at this point was for someone to recognize her.

She bounded up the infrequently used stairway, feeling
as though it were a treadmill on which she was making no
progress. Third floor. Was that all the further she had gone?
Even though she felt unable to move another step, onward
she climbed, taking two at a time on the sixth and final flight.
At the landing she leaned against the wall for a moment, her
breath coming in wheezing gasps, and fished into her purse
for the room key. Pulling it out and fastening the bag, she
dragged herself down the silent hall to 623.

The door closed with a click, and she fastened the safety
lock. For insurance, she opened the door again and hung the
Do Not Disturb sign on the knob.

Slipping off her shoes and tossing her packages into the
chair, Agnes flung herself onto the bed in exhaustion. With
her eyes closed, she lay there motionless. Pains from her
swollen feet and deflated lungs pierced her entire body. But
she had no time for self pity. There was work to be done.
With great effort, Agnes managed to rise to a sitting position
and finally to stand beside the bed.

Carefully she folded the covers back, removed each pil-
low from its jacket, and dropped them onto the floor. Then,
crossing her legs and hiking her skirt, she lowered herself
into a yoga position. She retrieved her sack of equipment
from the chair and emptied it into her lap.

With a squint, Agnes threaded the needle. She took out
a tag and placed it on the exact spot that had previously held
the same warning. Meticulously she worked, using an intri-
cate knot stitch to secure the cloth. The task was more diffi-
cult than she had anticipated. The elusive tag continually
slipped from her grasp and refused to look professionally attached. In frustration, she chewed at her lip and continued to sew.

As she finished her second pillow, Agnes realized that nearly all light had drained from the sky and that she was sewing in darkness. Lifting her glasses and rubbing her eyes, she limped, prickle-footed, over to the light switch and flicked on the dim overhead fixture. It certainly didn’t help much. She could go blind sewing by that light. After tugging off the mattress cover, she took a lamp from the night stand and placed it on the floor.

Her back ached unmercifully, and her stomach rumbled with hunger. Although she regretted not stopping to eat, she rationalized that food was only necessary to stay alive and she would surely live until morning without it. At present she had more important things to do. And so she continued to repair the damage done just that morning, until late that evening.

Agnes awoke the next morning certain that her worries were over. She had finished her job and done it well. There was not a chance in the world that she could be suspected of anything.

Briskly she showered and dressed, conscious that she must get about the business of seeing the city and sending out postcards. She would check at the desk to find out what was scheduled for the day.

As she left the room, she glanced back over her shoulder at the rumpled bed. Let the maid make it this time, she sniffed to herself confidently, and closed the door.

Jauntily she approached the desk clerk. “My name is Agnes Pruitt,” she smiled. “Have you a schedule of activities for me?”

“Oh, yes, Miss Pruitt. I’m sorry to say that you missed the Guggenheim yesterday. Whatever did you do all day?”

Agnes’ smile faded, and she froze in terror. Did he suspect something?