

CONFESSIOONAL OPEN

by Olivier Cazeaux & Jeannie Taillat

Irving Bycha and Kenny Heard are longtime friends. After high school and electronics studies at MIT, they fought together as commandos in Vietnam. There their paths parted. Irving became a priest and Kenny an engineer who founded his own manufacturing company.

The two friends had lost contact when Irving was named as the cure of a church in Los Angeles, just a few blocks down from the headquarters of Kenny's company. Renewing their friendship, Kenny devoted much of his time to the church in search of a reason to live when he had just recently lost his wife and children in an auto accident. So he came to finance the Saint Vincent's Foundation, an association formed by his friend Irving for the rehabilitation of young drug addicts. As the years passed, the SVF, has broadened its activities to include the fight against dealers, encouraging young reformees to testify against their former accomplices and employers. Lately Kenny has succumbed to the charms of Camilla, a young actress whom he has been seeing.

One evening Kenny announces to Father Irving that he intends to cut off his support of the SVF if the priest refuses to relax his attack against the dealers. He is quite concerned by the threats he has received and argues that they are overstepping the bounds in what is a matter for the police and the courts. Father Irving is sorry to find Kenny, the former Marine hero, reacting in such a way. When he mentions that such frailty is probably the fault of Camilla, Kenny sees red and spills all of his plans. He is about to marry soon and doesn't want his future wife in danger. Whatsmore, as a wedding present, he intends to finance the film of a young director in which Camilla would be the star. So he'll be needing the money that before had been dedicated to the SVF. The pitch rises between the two friends and Kenny decides to stop everything tomorrow. He counts on resigning from his position as vice-president of the SVF, then he'll

see his bank about suspending his contributions. Father Irving calms down and tries to convince his friend of his error, but Kenny launches into a discourse of revolt. He wants to live again, to finally enjoy his life without risking it all just to help a bunch of losers who sooner or later fall back into their evil ways. Even if it seems unjust, he's made his decision. He's dropping everything, well aware of the catastrophe that will result for the SVF.

Their conversation is interrupted by Kenny's secretary, Diana Cobb, who reminds him of the Heard Corporation board meeting that is beginning. The priest asks Kenny to wait till tomorrow to think about it and begs him for one more meeting before confirming his decision. The businessman hesitates a moment then suggests 7am the next morning. He can have one hour and no more. Afterwards, he'll do as he feels he must. Then he sarcastically advises Irving to pray that he dies before his wedding, when Camilla will replace the SVF as his unique inheritor. Father Irving was unaware of this fact. He congratulates Kenny on such a noble gesture and regrets even more that he should be taken in by a flirt whose only interest is his money. Kenny's reply: "And the church, Father Irving, what is her interest ?"

Leaving Heard Tower, Irving is greeted by the window washer, a former addict who benefited from the aid of the SVF. Irving speaks with him a moment and admires his technique for manipulating the suspended scaffold. Then he goes back to the church where his housekeeper Carmen announces that Mrs Gordon would like to set a time for her monthly confession. As Mrs. Gordon is an old lady who tends to confuse confession and psychoanalysis, Irving is tempted to joke a bit but hesitates; Mrs Gordon is also a generous giver to the SVF and the moment would be ill chosen to get on her bad side. He asks Carmen to call her back to suggest 6:45am, as the regular confessions begin at 7:30.

The night is well advanced and Father Irving is alone in the choir. He prays and laments. Such a good work, so worthwhile, will fail, and a generous and just man is heading for his undoing. Then suddenly he exclaims, "Mrs.

Gordon ! Mrs. Gordon you may just be the one to save the SVF." At this inspiration Irving hurries to the confessional placed in a side chapel. He thoroughly inspects the priest's box then the side of the penitent, trying to calculate what may be seen through the grill. Then he looks behind it. A heavy purple curtain runs along the wall separating it from the confessional. Ten feet further along, just before the altar, is a small unused doorway. After several thoughtful moments, he goes downstairs to his workshop.

There he puts together a sort of sound system : a speaker running to a microphone, an ear piece and a hifi receiver. He fumbles in an old chest and brings out a case labeled US Marines and opens it to disclose a disassembled rifle. Irving arranges the pieces in their appropriate places on a leather vest specially designed to carry the weapon this way. Then he goes back upstairs carrying a set of coveralls, a small back-pack, a ring of keys, and the gun vest.

Back in the chapel, he tries the keys until he finds the one that opens the little door. It gives onto a narrow dusty hallway that leads to the back of the church. About halfway along it, there is another passage to the right which ends in another doorway. Again the priest goes through the keys, and opens the door winding up in the side yard of the church. Seemingly satisfied, he relocks the door, leaves the coveralls and rifle in the hallway and goes back to the chapel. Seated in the priest's box, he dismounts the back of the confessional which he puts carefully back into place and installs his electronic equipment. Then he goes back downstairs, cleans up his work area and opens a drawer containing four electric light bulbs : three are bayonet type and one screws in. He takes the one that screws in and shakes it until the resistance is broken, then he slips it into his pocket.

6:20am the next morning.

Father Irving is just finishing the morning mass. The few attending leave the church and the father goes to have some coffee and a bit of cake that Carmen has prepared for him. Afterwards he heads straight for the confessional. There he

unscrews the lightbulb and exchanges it with the one in his pocket. Then he leans out of the box and calls to Carmen who is working in the sanctuary. Handing over the broken bulb, he asks her to bring him another one from the workshop. During this time, he slips discreetly into the penitent's side and verifies that nothing can be seen of his seat. He returns to his place as he hears Carmen approaching. As she tells him that there are no more screw-in-bulbs, the priest reassures her that it doesn't matter too much. He would have liked to read his Bible while Mrs. Gordon talked... but this incident will oblige him to hear confession more thoroughly. Before she goes back to her work, he asks Carmen to call Mr. Heard at 7:15 to let him know that Irving will be another 15 minutes late. He insists on 7:15 saying that it will make his tardiness will be less noticeable... that is if he manages to get rid of Mrs. Gordon in time.

6:40am. The priest turns on the light on the outside of the box to announce his presence, puts the earphone in his right ear and the miniature microphone on his tie. Then he removes the back panel, slips out of the box, behind the curtain and down to the door. From there he sees Mrs. Gordon waiting on a bench. He speaks into his microphone and the sound comes from inside of the confessional : "Come in, Mrs. Gordon. My light isn't working, but don't worry, I'm here." So Mrs. Gordon enters, kneels and recites her opening prayer...

About this same time, Kenny Heard is arriving at his tower, still empty so early in the morning. There's only the guardian at the entrance whom he greets before going into the elevator which takes him to the 14th and final floor.

Irving is in the dusty hallway, wearing the coveralls and a cap from the window cleaning company pulled down low. As he exits discreetly into the street, he listens to Mrs. Gordon's sins and answers with an occasional "yes" or "go on, I'm listening."

Arriving at the tower, he stares the suspended scaffolding labeled Stanton at the last floor. After a few seconds of

hesitation, he makes his decision. Confidently he passes the guardian announcing "Stanton for the windows." He takes the elevator and arrives at the last floor. There he enters the secretary's office and approaches the door that connects it to Kenny's. The time is 7:10; by means of his sound system he continues his polite reassurances during Mrs. Gordon's monologue.

On the other side of the door, Kenny answers Carmen's phone call. Irving puts together the pieces of his rifle. As soon as Kenny hangs up, Irving opens the door to shoot twice. Kenny slumps in his chair.

On the desk, the computer shows a half written letter. Kenny's letter of resignation to the SVF. Irving erases it, searches unsuccessfully through the papers, and types something in its place.

Then he disassembles his gun, leaves the office and climbs the stairs leading to the roof. He steps onto the suspended scaffolding and lowers himself down as he "tele-absolves" Mrs. Gordon. Arriving on solid ground, he returns rapidly to the church retracing his steps through the secret route.

Mrs. Gordon has since left, none the wiser to the activities of Father Irving.

Once in his box he looks at his watch : 7:28am. He reaches out one arm to switch on the light bulb illuminating a little sign above the box : "Confessionnal Open."

8 :00am at Heard Tower

The dead body of Kenny Heard is still resting in his armchair when Columbo arrives at the office. The men of his team are already there : Sergeant Dick Warrens, two men from the Labo, a doctor and three policemen. Columbo hopes he will not have to spend too much time on this affair because he has had to leave his dog alone in the car and he is concerned by its mental state. The Lieutenant is thus unusually satisfied with every thing Sgt Warrens says. "OK, Ok, very well Sgt. Anything else ?" He casts just a glance

at Heard's body as the Sgt gives him the first elements of the inquiry :

- 1) the body was discovered at 7:45 by Heard's secretary Mrs Diana Cobb, just as she arrived at the office.
- 2) only two shots were fired, right in the chest.
- 3) there are no indications of a burglary nor of a struggle; all is intact including the safe; this crime is probably the job of a hitman.
- 4) the only person the guardian has seen after Mr Heard and before Mrs Cobb, is a window washer who entered the tower at 7:10-7:15. The Sgt orders a portrait of the worker; Columbo agrees :

- What else, Sgt ?".

- There is a message written in large letters on the PC monitor : 'Too bad you didn't take us seriously. Let this be a warning'.

In the next office, Diana is crying softly. As Columbo watches silently, the Sgt asks her what the letters IB handwritten on Mr Heard's agenda at 7:00 am might mean. It's probably Irving Bycha, the Father Irving Bycha, Mr Heard's best friend. She didn't know they had this appointment. They just met yesterday at 6:00pm, as she was leaving, but at that time Mr Heard didn't ask her to record this new early appointment as he generally does. Upon hearing this, Columbo begins to take some interest in the case, as the Sgt continues "And what about the other letters written in the same hand : tel BOA, 9: 00 ?" Diana cannot answer, but a man has just arrived in the office. The distinguished gentleman introduces himself as Herbert Norton, Mr Heard's lawyer and councillor. Norton gives the answer :

-BOA is probably Bank of America where Mr Heard has his personal account.

Columbo examines the agenda and asks Diana to confirm that Mr Heard was not used to noting his appointments for himself. Diana confirms, a bit embarrassed, that he did so only for very personal affairs. Columbo smiles :

- You mean for instance love affairs ?

Diana lowers her head and goes on crying. Columbo shakes his head signaling for the Sgt to let her be, at least for the moment. The two detectives return to Heard's office to talk

to Herbert Norton about SVF and the importance of Kenny's part in it as well as its founder and chief, Father Irving. The drug traffickers didn't appreciate the job done by SVF in encouraging former dealers to testify against their bosses. Kenny had received threats for months by phone and mail. The murder is certainly the follow up of one of them. Columbo approves of this suggestion by shaking his head. Nevertheless, he should like to know if anything is missing in the safe. The lawyer checks immediately: nothing seems to be amiss since the last time he opened it himself, that is to say a couple of days ago.

Columbo must now question Father Irving to complete his report. He thanks the lawyer, asks Sgt. Warrens to print a listing of this morning's calls, and then follows Diana's instructions to get to Father Irving's church which is not far from the Tower : no longer than 10 minutes by foot.

At the bottom of the Tower, Columbo is relieved to find his dog still waiting quietly in the Peugeot. He returns to the hall and asks the guardian to have the kindness to keep the dog during the time he'll spend at the church. The guardian is very affected by the murder. He is aware of his carelessness. He let the window washer enter without checking his identity. The man was wearing coveralls and a cap with Stanton written on it. Stanton is the name of the firm in charge of window-washing. In answer to Columbo, the guardian admits not knowing anybody from Stanton. This is a new firm, hired recently, and he was not on service when they began to work at Heard Tower yesterday evening. The fake washer just said "Morning ! Stanton , for window washing". He seemed so much at ease that the guardian was quite unsuspecting. The poor man is now afraid of being fired.

Saint Vincent's Church is an old Spanish style building. Columbo enters respectfully and seems to admire the architecture and decoration of the church. Whispering to a man who is lighting a candle, he asks where to find Father Irving. The man points to his right, the first chapel on the side. Columbo winds up in front of the confessional from

which a woman is just exiting. The Lieutenant hesitates, but a few seconds after, he is prodded by an old and eager lady who is waiting behind him. Columbo is now sitting in the confessional, on the side of the penitent.

For a while, Columbo doesn't say anything, quite intimidated and waiting for the priest to speak the first. But Father Irving waits too. Surprised to hear nothing, Columbo stretches his head towards the grille. The priest says he is actually there and asks Columbo when he last confessed, then asks him to express his sins. After a short time of misunderstanding, a very embarrassed Columbo puts his LAPD card against the grille and apologizes. He explains he wondered whether Father Irving was actually in the confessional since there was no light inside. As Columbo comes out, Father Irving opens the door of his side. He points out the light bulb : broken and his housekeeper has not found a new one..." But please, Lt, what is the purpose of your visit ?" Columbo breaks the news to Father Irving, who joins his hands and seems to say a short prayer, then he invites the Lieutenant to follow him to his office to continue their conversation.

Just before walking out of the chapel and after the priest has requested that the eager lady come back later, Columbo kindly suggests exchanging the outside lightbulb for the inside one. He unscrews and re-screws the light back in the box. As the two men are crossing the nave, the priest congratulates Columbo for being so practical-minded.

At his office, Father Irving explains his 7:00am appointment with Kenny. After yesterday's meeting, they had to continue their conversation about SVF. Kenny was only available at this moment of the day, but he couldn't meet him after all because of a confession that ran overtime. Having anticipated this possibility, Father Irving had asked Carmen to warn Kenny at 7:15 and nullify their appointment if he was still in confessional at that time. During their conversation, Columbo is delighted to notice that Father Irving is clothed with a soutane. This recalls to him bygone days. But at that time, priests used to wear a white tunic above for confessions." A surplice" says Father Irving. He

usually has one but as he was expecting to leave quickly for Heard Tower, he had to be ready to go out.

As he is in a hurry, Father Irving suggests that Columbo come to see him again this afternoon at the SVF. He wants now to go and see his friend's body and manage the wake and funeral organization. Columbo advises him to go quickly to the police lab if he wants to have a chance to see the body before the autopsy.

After Father Irving has gone, Columbo makes a tour of the church when he spots Carmen in the confessional chapel. The housekeeper is running the vacuum cleaner. Before Columbo can say anything, he hears her grouching : she is furious to have just discovered dustbunnies on the carpet even though she cleaned the chapel from top to bottom a couple of days ago. Columbo looks around him and notices the heavy red curtain along the wall behind the confessionnal. He points it out to Carmen as a possible provider of dustbunnies and he straight away casts a glance behind it : no trace of any dust. The lieutenant is impressed and congratulates Carmen for her good work. As he picks up one of the dustbunnies not yet Hoovered by Carmen, he shows his LAPD card and explains the bad news. The house keeper confirms that she called Mr Heard at 7:15am, sure of the time because of the very precisely regulated bells made thanks to Father Irving's electronics skill : at each quarter of the hour, there is a special sound which allows one to know exactly what time it is.

Before going, Columbo asks Carmen where the door after the curtain leads. The housekeeper says the door has always been locked, never used, but probably leads to some kind of shed. As Columbo is about to return to Heard Tower, Carmen shows him the faster way to follow.

Columbo is walking quietly in the same little street used this morning by Father Irving. Drawing up at the level of the outside door, he glances at it but goes on without stopping.

Ten minutes later, Columbo arrives at the bottom of Heard

Tower and meets Lewis, the washer of Stanton who is being questioned very firmly by the Sgt Warrens. Lewis explains he is the only man from Stanton on this job and he begins work at 8:30. Then he mentions Kenny Heard and Father Irving, both of whom he met when he was welcomed at SVF as a drug addict. Lewis is filled with gratitude to them and is very sorry to learn of Kenny's death. He thinks this must be a dirty trick of the drug traffickers. To conclude, Columbo asks him if he is still in touch with SVF and his leaders. As a member of the SVF fellowship association, Lewis sends in his subscription but he sees them only at the yearly banquet. However Father Irving ran into him yesterday evening and he expected to see Mr Heard during his job at the Tower.

Columbo recovers his dog and his Peugeot and leaves the Tower.

The Peugeot pulls up in the drive of a luxurious Beverly Hills residence. when the butler comes out, raging against Columbo whose car is in the way. Humbly showing his card, the lieutenant announces Mr Heard's murder.

In the large hall of the house, Seymour, a very affected butler, explains that his master left home at 6:30. Usually he left later, at about 8:00-8:15. As far as the threats go, he says that Mr Heard hadn't spoken of a new one for two weeks, and he hasn't noticed any abnormal calls recently. Columbo asks to look around Heard's office. There he discovers a photo of Camilla : Seymour lets him understand she was his mistress but he seems a bit embarrassed and doesn't give anymore details about their affair. Camilla is an actress and she's is now on a shoot outside LA. Should he inform her ? Columbo agrees.

Then continuing his tour, he stops somewhat surprised, in front of a glass case sheltering military medals, Navy S.E.A.L.S and Sniper School certificates. The butler explains Heard was a volunteer during the Vietnam war. In a second window, there are a rifle with a silencer and a special jacket. Seymour explains it was used in submarine

operations to keep the weapons dry. Columbo shakes his head, filled with amazement and asks how Mr Heard could have kept his soldier's equipment. The butler explains that only Sniper School graduates can be granted such a privilege.

On the large table cluttered with papers, the lieutenant quickly reads the present letters then asks Seymour to keep for him any new mail that may arrive.

The Saint Vincent Foundation is located in a former factory converted into a building shared between housing, lecture rooms, offices and workshops. In a large hall, many people are going and coming in a busy atmosphere. In his typical sloppy attitude, Columbo is looking for the reception. A middle aged woman who is phoning in an office spots him. Still calling, she points him out to a guardian who immediately goes out to kindly fetch the detective. The lady is Mrs Anck, the Secretary of SVF. Taking Columbo for a drug addict, she begins to question him as to test his actual motivations to be helped. Fortunately Father Irving arrives putting a stop to the confusion and asks Mrs Anck to give Columbo a tour.

The Lieutenant thus visits cooking then electronics workshops where the former drug addicts are learning new skills. Some of them are very busy since they are preparing a Gala for which their class has been assigned to provide catering, light, sound and security services. Columbo is impressed by Father Irving's electronics skills demonstrated when he arrives at the workshop where he easily repairs a chip, giving very clear instructions to his students.

Bringing Columbo to his office, Father Irving recalls Kenny Heard's part in SVF which was the great pride of his life. Then he gives details of the threats from traffickers because of SVF's involvement in the fight against dealers. He has been threatened too, but with Kenny, they had decided to stand firm.

Now and in spite of Kenny's death, the show must go on. So he is sorry but he has to prepare for the Gala tomorrow to which he invites Columbo; a good way to see how well SVF can

transform dropouts into genuine workers. And before the lieutenant goes, he asks him if Kenny's body could be brought from the Lab (where he was refused permission to see the body this morning) for the wake he has planned for this evening, in this place that was so dear to Kenny. Columbo answers that he was just about to go to the Lab where the autopsy must have been at present completed. And he pledges he'll do his best to make sure the body be transferred to the wake as expeditiously as possible.

At the Lab, Columbo and Sgt Warrens are listening to the Coroner who confirms the hour of the murder as being between 7 and 8 am. Two lethal bullets have been shot at 20 feet from an Army rifle used by some special military corps or federal police sharp shooters and by Mafia marksman. Both shots precisely in the heart, point to the job of a professional. But something puzzles Columbo. Why has the killer used a rifle and not just a handgun ? A rifle could have been useful to assure the efficiency, but from 20 feet away, an actual marksman could be certain to have his man even with a pistol, which is much more practical to bear and hide.

The wake takes place in a large room in the basement of SVF building, decorated with a lot of flowers.

When Columbo arrives, he first meets Mr Norton, the lawyer, who is leaving. If Columbo wants to see him again, he'll be at the Heard Corporation tomorrow morning. Columbo nods to say OK then quickly spots Camilla, who is crying in front of Heard's body under the spluttering flashes of press photographers. Though he has not done it this morning when seeing her in Kenny's office, he realizes that Camilla plays Lina, a major role in "The Good Life", his wife's favorite soap opera. Columbo is amazed to meet such a familiar TV star. Seemingly forgetting his inquiry and the seriousness of the situation, he runs into Camilla as she is leaving the wake and he questions her as though she actually were Lina. He is mostly concerned by her plan to marry Jim, another character of the soap. Is she aware this man is only motivated by her fortune ?

Moved and amused by such naïve behavior, she motions her

bodyguard not to turn away Columbo. When at last, the detective says who he actually is, the actress invites him to continue their conversation at her home. They settle together in the star's limousine which pulls away through the crowd of all kinds of people who come and go from the wake. In the car, as he sees Camilla crying again, Columbo suddenly realizes he has behaved unsuitably with his former questions about the soap. He humbly apologizes.

In Camilla's flat, a man is phoning, a big cigar in hand. Just as Columbo is coming in and Camilla speaking to her housekeeper, the man concludes his call by "Even if you can't read it on my lips, you can believe Benny Marx : we are going to make Camilla a Jacky Kennedy and tomorrow, she'll marry Onasis" and he laughs, before coughing as he notices Columbo. Camilla makes the introductions. Benny Marx is a producer and a good friend of hers. It's thanks to him that Kenny and she met during an advertising film shoot for the Heard Corporation. After only three months, they had planned to marry. And Heard was willing to make her career soar. He had pledged an important sum for producing a feature film which would allow Camilla to become an actual star.

Columbo asks her if Kenny was afraid of the Mafia threats and what he intended to do about them. Camilla answers he didn't like to speak of these problems but he appeared to be more and more concerned by SVF's fight against dealers.

During the night, Father Irving returns to the confessional and the secret passage, then to his workshop to clean up all traces of his crime.

The next morning, Columbo enters Diana's office and asks to see Mr Norton whom they find in the next office where she shows in the lieutenant.

Columbo begins his questions with the wedding plans of Kenny and Camilla. Norton confirms it. It was foreseen to take place within three months. Norton had already completed the contract It just had to be signed. He shows it to Columbo. A classic contract, where in case of a divorce, Camilla

would have received from Kenny, 10% of his fortune and 50% of what they would have earned since their wedding. Moreover, Kenny has decided to make a new will to designate Camilla as his new and only heir.

-Instead of who ? asks Columbo.

- Nobody else besides me knew it, but as he had no more direct family, Kenny had designated the SVF to inherit his fortune.

Columbo is impressed by this information. He roams around the office without a word, shaking his head and fiddling with his hair. Suddenly he asks Norton why Heard wanted to transfer all his fortune from one heir to another? Norton explains that Kenny was overwhelmed by this love affair. Since his wife's death, he'd never fallen in love. Very quickly Camilla had become the new center of his life. And Kenny wasn't a man to share his heart.

Columbo asks if this new will had already been made. Written but not again signed, answers Norton : it was to be signed the day of the wedding. The lawyer confirms that nobody knew of this plan, not even Camilla. However it is the former will that remains the only actual will."And does Father Irving know the Foundation inherits?" asks Columbo. Norton explains that he's waited until today to check in Kenny's briefcase and last papers if he had anticipated his plan about the will. But he has not.

Suddenly Benny Marx bursts into the office. He wants to know how things are to be managed about the money that Heard was to transfer this week for the feature production. Norton is surprised. He hasn't received any instructions about it. For him, 2 million have been paid. It's a shut case now. Benny agrees for this first payment but he is speaking of the rest, the other 8 million pledged by Heard and planned to be payed in four instalments of 2 million each in the financial contract which he shows to a confused Norton. The lawyer sincerely looks to be discovering this information for the first time. He must examine this agreement and he'll get in touch with Benny Marx in a couple of days. Benny goes out. Norton reads the contract. Incredible ! It is made in the personal name of Kenny Heard that is to say Heard Corporation is not involved. So how could Kenny pledge such

payments ? 700 000 US \$ - 80 or 90% of his cash - are already allocated monthly to the SVF. Columbo extracts his sloppy little notebook from his raincoat. He reads that according to Heard's agenda, he was to call his banker at 9:00am. Might Mr Norton question him about this film financing ?

Norton immediately rings up the Bank of America. The executive in charge of Mr Heard's accounts knew that Mr Heard wanted to join him yesterday morning, but not exactly why. Heard had just spoken of an installment plan he wanted to have set-up.

Columbo is wondering if Father Irving might have more information about this strange business. From the window, he admires the spire of Saint Vincent's Church, shaking his head slowly.

Mr Norton says he'll examine very closely the contract brought to him by Benny Marx and all the documents which concern the financing of this film. If he finds anything odd, he'll let Columbo know. The Lieutenant takes his leave of Norton then goes to Diana's office. The secretary is still very moved by Mr Heard's death. Columbo tries to console her with some kind words, then he returns to the inquiry. He is still puzzled by the two consecutive appointments between Kenny and Father Irving. He'd like Diana to recall what she may have heard when the two men were speaking. Diana is shocked that one could believe she didn't respect Mr Heard's privacy but she finally comes to confess that she had noticed the men seemed nervous that evening. They had spoken much more loudly than they were accustomed to; she thinks they may have had an argument. But she cannot imagine why, since they were usually quiet men, always in agreement in their plans.

DEA policemen force their way into a flat and arrest a man who was trying to escape by the window. After a fast and furious combing, a dozen bags of heroin and a great amount of dollars are discovered in a clothes cupboard with a false bottom. The detective who leads the group suddenly catches a glimpse of a cap with the word Stanton written on it. He picks it up and asks one of his men to warn Sgt Warrens. He is wondering if this affair might not be related to Heard's

murder.

Columbo enters the church and runs into Carmen whom he asks where he can find Father Irving. The housekeeper leads the lieutenant to the underground workshop praising the priest's generosity : in spite of his lack of time, he is repairing her television.

Columbo apologizes to Father Irving for coming without warning, but he has some questions to ask him about the crime. Father Irving feels at ease, and kindly welcomes Columbo, who suddenly spots a Stanton cap on a hook above a suit of coveralls. He can't help laughing and humouristically intimates that, if he wasn't who he is, Father Irving could be taken for the mysterious window washer who is likely to have killed Mr Heard : his stature fits that described by the guardian and he has a Stanton cap ! Father Irving smiles and explains that this cap is a present from Lewis, a former student of SVF who has become a window washer. A mischievous Columbo takes out another Stanton cap from his pocket : he has been offered one too, when he met Lewis yesterday. It seems that Lewis is so proud of his job that he gives out caps to everybody he runs into. Going on in a joking tone, he suggests that Lewis could even have provided the very murderer with the cap.

Coming at last to the actual reason of his visit, Columbo begins to give the latest information on the inquiry. He speaks about the weapon and the question of why the killer, likely a professional, has used a rifle rather than a handgun. Though agreeing it's quite strange Father Irving suggests the killer didn't know what would be his shot distance. As in doubt he would have preferred a gun viable both for short and long distances. Columbo seems to accept to this hypothesis and asks the Father what he knew about Kenny and Camilla's wedding plans.

Father Irving looks to be surprised. For him, it was no more than a passing affair. Then he confirms that Kenny never said he had designated SVF as his heir. Nor did he say he planned to change his will to benefit Camilla. And this story of the film seems very odd. Especially when Columbo explains how it would have been impossible for Kenny to pay both the film installments and the \$700,000 allocated

monthly to the SVF. Father Irving feigns confusion by this news. But glancing at his watch, he is sorry to say he must leave. As he mounts the stairs from the basement, Columbo notices the priest is not clothed today with a soutane. Father Irving answers he wears civilian clothes when he has to spend his day outside, for SVF activities. So why did he wear a soutane yesterday ? "Because of confessions, especially with old people who dearly love tradition." With an "Of course !" Columbo seems to apologize for having asked such a superfluous question, but just before walking out of the church, he comes back to the Father with his typical "One more thing" to bring up the argument Diana has witnessed. Father Irving, just a bit embarrassed, answers it was of no matter. But Columbo insists on knowing the reason. This is a murder case and every detail counts and has to be reported. "OK, Lieutenant. Kenny and I disagreed about the SVF students providing catering services at the Gala. He was afraid our team wouldn't be experienced enough and he suggested we ought to hire a subcontractor. But I explained to him it was too late and that made him angry. That's all."

Father Irving, is watching from his office window : Columbo has just settled in his car and starts away. Straight away the priest takes off his street clothes then puts on his soutane and returns to his workshop.

Father Irving's car stops in front of Kenny's house. Seymour shows him in, a bit surprised. Father Irving asks to see Kenny's library since he has to refresh his memory before writting his funeral speech. The butler lets him go upstairs to the office. There Father Irving unbuttons his soutane under which his Navy-SEALS jacket bears his dismantled rifle. He then opens - with gloved hands - one of the windows from which he takes Kenny's rifle and replaces it with his own. Then he searches among the bookshelves but seems not to have find what he was looking for. He goes downstairs and calls Seymour to tell him the volume of the MIT Yearbook he needs is missing from Kenny's library. The butler asks him what this book looks like. Father Irving specifies that it is a large red-leather volume of the year 66. Seymour suddenly recalls that such a book has been

laying in the living room for several days. He immediately fetches it and proudly hands it over. The Father thanks him and says he 'll bring it back in a couple of days.

At the LAPD Station, Sgt Warrens is explaining to Columbo and the Captain what a good job the DEA team has done. Vic Norvo, the man they have arrested today, could be Heard's murderer. He is a dealer who has confessed to have worked at Stanton as a window-washer, which would explain that he has a cap of this firm at home. \$15,000 have been found as well. Norvo claims that he earned this money by selling drugs, but such a sum is curiously the present price paid by the Mafia for a hit of that rank.

Moreover, he fits the guardian's description and he has been called to look at the line up which is about to take place. If the captain seems satisfied, Columbo is puzzled by one fact. Dealers are not killers. They belong to two different worlds. Why have hired such a man ? Sgt Warrens agrees this is a strange situation, but this could explain that a rifle and not a handgun was used. As he was no marksman, he would have used a rifle, making it easier for him to have his man On the other hand, Vic Norvo knew the district very well and as a former window-washer, could be particulary at ease to play this part. Columbo nods but is still cautious.

The lineup consists of ten men, all clothed in coveralls and wearing a Stanton cap. Hidden by the two way mirror, the Guardian is watching closely; behind him the Captain, Columbo and Warrens are silently waiting. After a moment of hesitation, Vic Norvo is pointed out by the witness. For the captain, the case is about to be shut. They just need to get the suspect's confession. "Confession. You've said the right word, Captain" says a thoughtful Columbo. And he leaves the station just after Warrens tells him he's got the listing of Mr Heard's office communications : between 0:00 and 7:30am, only one call : at 7:16am from the Saint Vincent's Church.

Columbo enters the church where he immediately runs into Carmen as a mass is celebrated in the nave. He needs some details from her before completing his report. When she

called him yesterday morning, what exactly did Mr Heard answer ?

The housekeeper remembers he seemed sorry that Father Irving couldn't come. "He said something like : He's the one who insisted, but never mind. I'm not changing my plans in anycase."

Columbo writes out this account on his notes and, hardly reading his previous ones, recalls that Father Irving was at that time in the confessionnal. "Would you know who with ?" Carmen looks over the people who are leaving the church after the mass. "With Mrs Gordon. You are lucky, Lieutenant : here she comes now."

Carmen does the introductions and Columbo and Mrs Gordon wind up sitting on a bench of the Confessional Chapel. Mrs Gordon confirms she was in the confesional from 6:45-6:50 to 7:25-7:30. And the nice old lady is surprised to have to say she didn't actually see Father Irving. "It's not important Lieutenant. When you confess, you only have to speak with the priest." Mrs Gordon remembers that Father Irving told her the light bulb in his box was broken, which explains why he wasn't visible through the grille. Columbo records this in his notes and takes leave of Mrs Gordon. Then he stops in front of the door by the curtain and observes it thoughtfully. Carmen comes up behind him and asks what's the matter. Columbo is sorry to be so curious but he can't help wondering what this door is hiding. Could he have the keys ? Carmen shrugs her shoulders then disappears before coming back with a heavy bunch of old keys. She gives it to Columbo leaving it up to him to find the right one. As for her, she has a lot of work and must be about it.

As the lieutenant opens the door, a dustbunny flurries around his feet. He picks it up, puts it in his pocket and enters the dark and gloomy passage. As he has no flashlight, he advances slowly, feeling his way as a blind man only to bang into another door. He tries several of the keys, succeeds in opening the door, and eventually winds up outside, in the little street he used yesterday to reach the Heard Tower. Columbo shakes his head and returns to the Confessional Chapel.

Gala of the Writers Guild of America. Columbo arrives in a tuxedo. Students of SVF are managing the security with professional ease. Recognizing among the team, one of those he saw yesterday, he expresses his amazement to notice they have headsets to communicate between themselves. The student explains proudly that they have produced this material themselves at their electronics workshop, thanks obviously to Father Irving .

Father Irving has just arrived. He seems satisfied with the organization. After the President of the WGA has finished his speech, the priest gives Columbo a tour. At the large dance floor where lights and sound are monitored by his students, Father Irving shows the material which has been made in whole or in part or repaired in the SVF workshop. Then he questions Columbo about his inquiry. Is it true that a suspect has been arrested ? Columbo confirms but unfortunately predicts that this is not a good trail. The priest is surprised : according to the media, the guardian would have recognized the suspect as the fake washer. Columbo answers this is not enough to charge him with the murder, especially since a new element clears him. Vic Norvo has tried to prove his innocence by claiming to have been fired by Stanton because he suffered from vertigo. He wouldn't have been able thus, to have gotten down with the mobile scaffolding as the murderer is likely to have done. But this story of vertigo didn't convince the Police. For \$15,000 a few minutes of vertigo wouldn't have stopped an actual killer. The priest doesn't understand.

- So what ? You've just told me he was innocent.

- Because Father it's a rule in the Police, to check any and all information. So I did. I called Mr Stanton about his former employee. He fired him but not at all because of vertigo. He actually fired him because he couldn't read or write, which came to be more and more of a nuisance for the firm. To check this was still true, I tested the man. If he wanted to be freed, he only had to write it down and I gave him a piece of paper. But he just seemed frozen in front of the sheet : he couldn't write anything nor could he have left the

message on Heard's computer. And if he didn't leave the message, he didn't shoot Heard."

Father Irving smiles, feigning appreciation that thanks to Columbo's cleverness, an injustice has been avoided. Then he leads his host to the many buffet tables where luxurious food and wine are being served by well-trained SVF Maitres D. Father Irving introduces him to Mr Flanagan, responsible of the Catering Departement before being caught in the crowd of the Gala. Enjoying a shrimp canapé, Columbo congratulates Mr Flanagan and says it would have been a pity to have hired a subcontractor to do this job. To a surprised Flanagan, Columbo explains his meaning : Mr Heard was wrong to think SVF team wasn't experienced enough. Flanagan is still astonished : Mr Heard never had such an opinion. He called him the eve of his death about the Gala and was very confident about the catering. Kenny never had the idea to hire a subcontractor. And to answer Columbo, Flanagan specifies it was around noon when Heard called him. The Lieutenant thanks him and savours another canapé.

In a well filled Saint Vincent's Church, the funeral mass is at its close. Followed by the crowd, six young Navymen are bearing the casket, draped with the American flag. Columbo, who has put on a black tie, is already outside with Warrens. As he spots Camilla, he comes up to offer her his deepest sympathy. Camilla thanks him and says that this drama could have been avoided. She had repeatedly advised Kenny to take the Mafia's threats seriously. In his last days, he seemed to wake up to this, but it was difficult for him to leave his long time friend. They had shared a sacrificial concept of life, but on the other hand, Father Irving had no wedding plans ... Camilla sighs with frustration estimating that Kenny's killer will probably never be arrested. But a mysterious Columbo says he has good reasons to disagree with her : "Sooner than you can imagine, Miss, the murderer will be in jail."

At the cemetery, Father Irving is completing an emotive speech in front of a large audience. In the first row, Columbo notices several veterans whose chests are covered

with medals. Among them, there is a Navy SEALs Colonel. Columbo approaches to speak with him after the casket is lowered. The colonel praises Father Irving's modesty. Though he only spoke of Kenny's military glory, he too was a hero. Columbo nods : to have founded and developed such an institution as SVF is truly a kind of heroism. But the Colonel insists. "I was referring to Irving's war record. He was a Navy SEALs too. I trained with Kenny and Irving at the Sniper School, then we wound up together in Vietnam in the same special operations. They were the bravest among us." Columbo is thoughtful for a few seconds, as though he were combing his memory then he asks the colonel if it is true that only Snipers School Graduates can keep their gun when leave the Navy. "That's right Lieutenant, but another condition is to have been under fire. And, " he chuckles, "we were under it!"

Going back to the LAPD station, Columbo turns towards Beverly Hills and reaches Heard's house. Seymour, just arrived from the cemetery, is parking his car. Columbo comes to him to say he 'd like to be provided with the mail addressed to Mr Heard. When inside the house, the butler opens a bottle of Port and pours two glasses in order to revive their minds after this trying moment. Columbo praises Father Irving's beautiful speech, emotive and sometimes funny, especially when it recalled the University years. Seymour can't help but explain that it is in part thanks to him that Father Irving has recited so precisely these memories. And he gives an account of the priest's visit yesterday. Then he fetches the mail and gives it to Columbo who is about to go when he asks "just one thing". Did Father Irving have on his soutane yesterday ? Seymour replies in the affirmative and Columbo takes his leave : "Thank you so much, sir."

Later in the day, Father Irving leaves his office at the SVF building to come back to his church, where Carmen is wiping the candle holders. As he runs into her, the housekeeper says that Columbo is waiting for him at the Confessional Chapel.

Surprised, the priest goes across the nave and reaches the chapel but there is no sign of Columbo. He is wondering what's going on when a voice coming from the confessional speaks to him. "I'm in your box, Father. Could you come in ?" The priest recognizes Columbo's voice and gets angry. "I would ask you to come out of there right now, lieutenant ! You should not joke with such holy matters. Please come out from my box!" As Columbo doesn't move, the priest wrenches open the box door. Instead of Columbo, there is a sound amplifier linked to a HF set : exactly his own material. Father Irving is stunned when the voice goes on : "Am I actually here, in your box, or rather am I here, in this passage ?" The door by the curtain opens up and Columbo steps out, bearing a head-set.

"Wonderful electronics, isn't it ? One of your students lent me this kit yesterday at the WGA Gala."

Father Irving tries to keep a smile : "If you like it, it's yours Lieutenant."

Columbo approaches the priest and takes a more serious tone :

- I'm sorry, sir, but that's impossible as it is now an exhibit.

- An exhibit ? What do you mean Lieutenant ?

- I mean that I accuse you of having killed your friend, Mr Kenny Heard.

- How could I have done it ? I was in my confessional during the murder. You've seen Mrs Gordon, haven't you ?

- I saw her but she didn't see you. She just heard you. This kit proves it's possible to simulate you were in the box when you were actually outside. First in this passage, after having left your box by removing its backpanel and slipping behind the curtain. Would you believe me, this humble piece of dust lead me to understand your strategy. (Columbo takes out a dustbunny from his pocket) This forgotten door, the gloomy passage, the second door, then the little street you took to reach Heard Tower where you shot your friend.

- But what could have been my motive to do such a thing ?

- You told me that you didn't know that SVF was Kenny's

heir and that he planned to name Camilla instead. And you told me you didn't know that Kenny was involved in a film project. But actually you learned of all these things at your 6:00 appointment, the eve of Kenny's death.

- How can you say that Lieutenant ?

- Because only something serious can explain your argument with Kenny. And your story of catering doesn't hold up. I spoke with Mr Flanagan who had a call from Heard about the Gala. He assures me that Kenny was not at all willing to hire a subcontractor. And I've two other clues which prove my theory. First the banker who was to be called at 9:00am for a question of installment payments. Second there is Kenny's reaction when Carmen phoned at 7:15. He was very sorry and said he wouldn't change anything of his plan. What plan ? And why claim to have missed this morning's appointment when there was a serious disagreement to resolve? The only possible answer is that you'd made up your mind during the night to kill Kenny as the only way to preserve SVF, the work of your life.

- Nobody saw me at Heard Tower the morning of the murder.

- The guardian has described a man who looks like you. And you've got the Stanton cap and the worker suit.

- However you 've not found the gun. So what can you prove ?

- Though you've tried to hide it from me, I discovered you were a Navy SEALs too. And as a former Sniper, you had the right to keep your weapon : a Remington special 1958, the very model used for the murder. You have this gun, Father.

- Would you believe I 'd kept it if I'd actually killed Kenny ?

- Yes Father. Because you're a clever man : you know that the best way for a weapon to be found is to discard it. So you behaved just as you did with the cap that you left well in sight as would have done an innocent man who has no reason to hide anything.

Father Irving turns pale and is silent for a while.

- You are right Lieutenant. I must confess I have a rifle. But you can evaluate it and you'll see it's not the weapon of the crime.

Columbo and the priest go down to the underground workshop. Father Irving gets out his rifle from a tool chest. He shows it to Columbo who examines it.

- I suppose, father, this rifle is still in good condition, isn't it.

- ...Yes

- I suppose it is because Seymour, Mr Heard's butler, told me that you sometimes went to the shooting range with Kenny and the last time was one month ago. Is that right ?

Father Irving nods and Columbo cocks the rifle and tries in vain to pull the trigger : it's locked. So he gives the rifle to the priest who anxiously dismantles it. A little piece of the trigger is broken. As Father Irving seems not to understand what's hapening, Columbo takes out a letter from one of his pockets. It is adressed to Mr Kenny Heard, has arrived today and comes from the Woodrow Weapons Manufactory, Pittsburgh. He reads it : the piece UF 1002 512 of the trigger of your Remington special won't be available before three weeks.

Columbo to conclude :

- Should I check on this rifle, that the piece UF 1002 512 is broken ?

Father Irving is completely upset. He nevertheless tries a last reply to Columbo's charge.

- I would have exchanged the weapons. This one would be Kenny's since mine would be at Kenny's office, that what you mean ? (Columbo nods) I actually went to Kenny's yesterday but how could I bring the rifle without being spotted by the butler : I didn't carry any bag or case. Seymour can confirm that.

- Seymour in fact actually gave me the answer this morning, Father. He saw you with your soutane though when I left you, a few minutes before you went to Kenny's, you were in civilian clothes and according to your habits, have no reason to take them off for clerical ones. Do you see my raincoat, Father. It's large like your soutane. Very practical to hide this kind of vest.

Columbo unbuttons his coat : he's wearing the Navy SEALS special jacket in which the dismantled murder rifle is arranged.

This time, Father Irving is duped.

- I suppose you have suspected me since the beginning, haven't you?

- That's right Father. As soon as I met you, I was puzzled about the story of the lightbulb. To make known - with Carmen's testimony - that you've a good reason not to light your box this morning was a very smart idea. But there was the outside bulb, Father. How could such a practical man as yourself have not thought to replace the broken one with it ?

After a few seconds of silent, a grave Father Irving tries hopelessly to justify himself.

- I know it's tragic, Lieutenant. The SVF is the last hope for so many dropouts; it had to be saved. Kenny's death was the price to pay for it. And I can imagine that where he is now, he can understand and ... forgive me.

- I do hope so, Father. And I somewhat understand you too. But should I remind you of the old maxim that you probably still teach to children : "It's never right to do wrong to do right".

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