

The Missing Clue



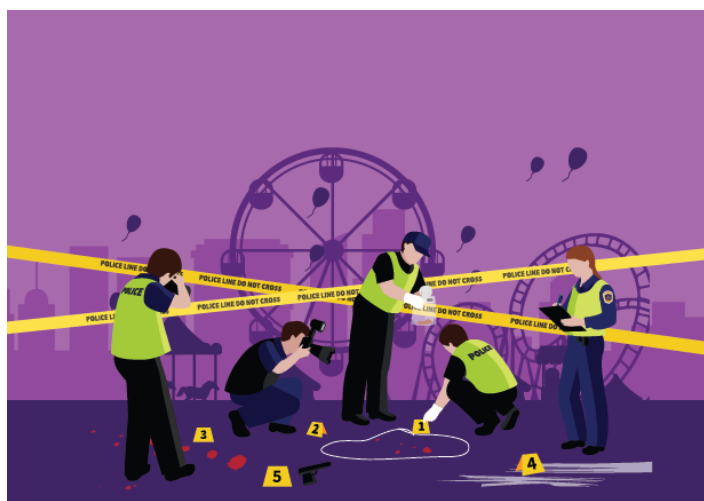
Setting and characters



In the cold and dark room of a small town prison, defence attorney Marta Costa and her assistant James Almeida collect the testimony of a young man, Paulo Azevedo. He is dressed in jeans and black T-shirt, wears black Nike sneakers. His hair is very short on both sides of the head, street style. 'Paulo Azevedo, do you know that you stand accused of violently assaulting Laura Pereira at her home two days ago?' Marta asks him. 'The police found your fingerprints all over the place.' 'It wasn't

me! I didn't do anything! Some time ago I met Laura at a poetry session at the university. Since then I have been to her house several times to discuss poetry! I would never hurt her!" The conviction of the young man's words affected Marta, who observed his face attentively. Was he telling the truth? 'Did you ask Laura for money?' James asked incisively. Paul gripped his chair and wiped his sweated hands on his pants before answering: 'I've never asked her for anything, but she offered to pay my university fee. If she hadn't done so, I would not have been able to continue my studies. Please believe me: I am innocent. That day, when I left her house, she was fine.' 'What time was it?' James asked. 'I'm not sure, maybe 9:30 p.m.' Marta looked Paulo in the eyes. Would this young man be able to assault an elderly woman like Laura Pereira so brutally? She thought not. Martha and James looked at each other. Neither liked loose ends in the cases they defended. If necessary, they would get their hands dirty and visit the crime scene. Their last words to Paul were encouraging: 'Well, we believe you're innocent. We're going to have to investigate the crime scene!'

Crime scene



Marta and James's footsteps resounded on the damp sidewalk of the quiet road, which took them directly to the gate of a grand manor house, only partially visible among a lush park. Edgar Fontes, the police detective, led them into a sumptuously decorated living room with sofas lined with faded dark red velvet. The walls were lined with oil paintings by famous painters. Marta's piercing blue eyes were immediately drawn to the blood stain on the carpet. Laura Pereira had been brutally

assaulted with a blunt object with a blow on the head - allegedly a crowbar that had been found on the floor, stained with blood. It had Paulo's fingerprints. Laura was in critical condition in hospital. 'How did a crowbar get in here? Did the assailant come in through the ajar garden door and attacked the old woman?' Marta asked. James didn't even answer. He knew Marta liked to think out loud. Always attentive to details, he drew Marta's attention to the father clock. The upper door glass was broken and the dial had stopped at 9:25, a knitting needle was dropped by the sofa, and a broken cup had rolled under the sofa. In the knitting basket there were two skeins of grey wool. On the coffee table there were two cups and three saucers. A heavy object, such as an ashtray or stone bowl, had left a halo of tiny powder crystals on the table. The ajar garden door opened on to a flowerbed which seemed to have been sown recently. Apparently there were no human footprints on the soft soil or maybe someone had disguised them with a little planting hoe.

The detective



Martha and James looked at each other. They loved to investigate crime scenes. They belonged to an amateur detective club and in their role as defence attorneys they didn't miss an opportunity to look for evidence, motif and opportunity. They also loved to do it together because their thoughts seemed to complete each other's. As they looked around the room where Laura Pereira had been assaulted, James commented, 'There is one thing that does not add up. You don't knit with a

single needle. Where's the other one?' 'The old lady seems to have given fight: Look at the broken cup on the floor and the broken upper door of the father clock. She must have known her assailant, since there were three people having coffee. She must have just reached out at anything she could lay a hand on to defend herself', Marta said softly. 'It's too bad she can't tell us what happened.' Suddenly, Marta fell silent and knelt on the carpet pointing at some tiny dust fragments by the leg of an armchair. 'This looks like granite chips. Where has this come from?'

The suspects



'Why did someone assault Laura Pereira? According to the police forensics evidence we read, it appears that Paulo is the prime suspect in the assault, because he was caught leaving here shortly after the crime. His fingerprints were on the crowbar. The motif seems to have been money: he must have come to ask her for money. This is what Laura Pereira's niece, Helena Pereira, told the police. Helena is Laura's niece and lives with her. She told the police she had heard loud voices in

discussion the night her aunt was assaulted. According to her, Paulo and his girlfriend had been invited for after dinner coffee that day. As they spoke, a tall, dark young woman approached. She introduced herself as Helena Pereira, the victim's niece. She was wearing faded jeans and a green hand-knitted sweater. Upon learning that they were Paulo's defence attorneys, Helena cast a glacial gaze at them and said, 'How could Paulo and his girlfriend do something like this to my aunt? She was their friend.' 'You said Paulo and his girlfriend?' interrupted Marta. 'Yes, that afternoon, I heard Paulo and his girlfriend yelling at my aunt. I was surprised when there was a sudden silence. I came down to see what had happened and found my aunt on the floor, unconscious, with a blow to the head. The whole room was upside down as if there had been a fight.' James, who had discreetly kept behind Marta jumped into the conversation. 'What's Paulo's girlfriend's name?' 'Aquessoco', Helena answered turning around to face him. 'That day she came for the first time. I met her a few weeks ago. She's been living with Paulo for three years. She comes from some African country, I don't know which.' James said sarcastically, 'That's a lot of information for someone who doesn't know her.' She, in turn, blushed, lowered her eyes and said: 'Paulo told me so, I don't know her.' As they left Laura Pereira's house, Marta said to James, 'The police report does not confirm a girl was seen leaving the premises that day. Only Paulo. We'd better take a look at Paulo's apartment to see if there is really a girlfriend. I have the key.' The apartment in which Paul lived was only the size of a room and there were clothes and books scattered everywhere. Insightful, James turned to Marta and said, 'Look at the grey woollen scarf on the chair: isn't it exactly the same colour as the skeins that were in the knitting basket in Laura Pereira's room?' After some time, he added, 'I don't think our defendant swims in cash either.'

Examine the Crime Scene



Back at the scene of the crime, Marta and James revised what they knew. 'There are three suspects apparently' Marta said, 'Paulo, his alleged girlfriend and Helena. What do you think, James? Why would any of them assault Laura? Do you think it was the mysterious girlfriend? What reason could she have for hitting Laura? Or was it Paulo? Maybe he wanted more money and she refused to give it to him.' James turned to Martha and continued her thoughts, 'Helena could have a motif. She

might be jealous of her aunt because Paulo comes to see her so often or she may not like Paulo. Why did she give us so much information on Paulo's girlfriend?' Marta didn't comment. Mentally she reviewed the clues: a crowbar that appeared to be the crime weapon and which had been taken from the garden store room by Paul himself, as he had told the police. According to him, Laura had asked him to get the crowbar to lift the father clock because Helena had lost a knitting needle and said it had rolled in that direction. A broken cup under the couch. There were three cups, so three people in the room. Laura and two guests. A single knitting needle. If one had rolled underneath the father clock, it made sense that there was only one. The garden door ajar. Had anyone entered or left the room? To do what? Strange dust crystals on the floor and on the table. Dust crystals. Dust crystals. Intuition told her not to rule out this clue, but for now she didn't know what to do with it. Then there was the question of time: the dial of the father clock had stopped at 9:25, the police report said Paulo had been seen at 9:30 p.m. leaving Laura's house. Laura's assault must have happened between 9 and 10 p.m. And then there was also the recording of Helena's call to the police emergency number at 9:35.

Mystery Resolution



'It seems to me' Marta confided to James, while sitting down on the entrance steps to Laura's house, 'that there is a solution to this mystery.' James didn't even answer. He was used to Marta's deductions, but he had also solved the mystery himself. 'Do I dig up the soil of the flowerbed?' he asked smiling. 'Naturally,' was Marta's answer while she continued, 'And what do you expect to find? An object made of stone, granite, maybe? With blood marks on it?' You're becoming a master, James. Come

on, let's do it. No one forbade us to dig outside the crime scene.' As they dug up the flower bed, they found a granite ashtray, chipped and with blood marks. They smiled at each other. 'So, the crowbar is not the crime weapon. Someone wanted to make it look as it were. Laura was hit with the ashtray. It remains to be seen by whom,' Marta said in a low voice. James put on the coat he had taken off to dig up the soil. 'The next thing we need to find is the missing knitting needle,' announced James confidently. 'That's where you're wrong: we don't need to find the missing knitting needle to solve the mystery. I know Paulo didn't attack Laura Pereira. It was Helena', replied Laura. James was baffled. 'How did you come to that conclusion?' Marta explained. 'The knitting needle under the father clock was a decoy to blame Paul. Did you notice the hand-knitted sweater Helena was wearing? We assumed from the beginning that the knitting was Laura's, but we were wrong. It was Helena's. And who do you think knitted the scarf we found at Paul's house? Helena. Probably the girl has a crush for the boy.' James reluctantly agreed. Marta smiled confidently and continued. 'There's likely no girlfriend in the story. It was Helena who brutally assaulted her aunt after Paul left and hid the ashtray in the flowerbed. Probably out of spite, because Paulo liked being with her aunt more than with her. If we dig deep enough into her past, there must be some record of violence. 'But there were three cups,' James insisted. Marta continued to follow her trail of thought. 'She had planned it all to the last detail. After Paul left, she came down and hit her aunt with the ashtray. She probably wanted to kill her. Before she called police emergency, she moved the furniture around to make it look like a fight had happened. Before the police arrived she just had time to bury the ashtray in the flower bed and to stain the crowbar with her aunt's blood. That would incriminate Paulo. The third cup was a trick: if the police did not go after Paulo, it would have to go after Paulo's supposed girlfriend. Did you notice how she was so forthcoming with information about his girlfriend? Let's go. I know how we're going to defend Paulo from the assault charge.' By this time, James was convinced and did as he always did. He completed Marta's thoughts with an action plan. 'We just have to ask the police to analyse the fingerprints on the cups to exclude the alleged 'girlfriend'. The ashtray certainly has Helena's fingerprints and Laura's blood. The scarf knitted for Paulo by Helena, which we found at his house, may be proof that she has feelings for him and that she is jealous of her aunt's affection for Paulo.' Marta smiled wryly. 'Paulo is such a poetic mind, he probably never

noticed that Helena had a crush for him or that she resented every single affection he showed for her aunt or for university colleagues!

The story trailer



A young man in prison is charged with assaulting an elderly rich lady. He claims to be innocent. Two defence attorneys turned detectives decided to find out the truth. A mystery story in which clues accumulate, suspects tell lies and motifs are not what they seem. Marta and James, the clever pair of detectives use observation and deduction to solve the mystery.