

SOUTH MAIN STORIES

a short story collection by

Robert McGowan

The Allaway Cretin

The organization officially in charge of downtown revitalization was the Renaissance Memphis Commission, the RMC, a comically visionless little bureaucracy with a staff of eight or ten clueless naifs whose ostensible function was to exercise initiative and ingenuity (*leadership* is the word they liked) in bringing new life to downtown, which in recent decades had, like many other downtowns across the country, lost luster, pretty much all of it.

But by the mid-1980s, the South Main district, which stretched bleakly for several blocks southward from the central core of downtown, and which the RMC had written off altogether, had already begun its comeback while the Commission was, I suppose, looking the other way—or more likely, if you ask me, nowhere at all.

When at last they awoke to what was going on they eagerly assigned a South Main liaison whose duty, lest the RMC appear wholly irrelevant, was to coordinate the suggestions of the street's pioneers, the mere handful who'd gotten the ball rolling on their own, with the resources of city government.

The liaison they sent us was one Doris Allaway.

Whom we came in time to refer to as: The Allaway Cretin.

Which to be honest I felt a little guilty about. Calling her

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that. Doris was without question one of the clueless, pitifully so, but the poor thing *wanted* to help, wanted to be integral to The Great South Main Adventure. She was sincere and she was earnest. But Jeeze . . .

She'd call now and then to ask about coming to talk with us, the two or three of us who in the early and mid-1980s were hands-on involved. There were of course several others a little later on. But in the beginning it had been mostly Thomas alone she came to chat with.

He remembered an occasion when she visited him to talk about prostitution, the South Main hookers, who formed at the time an impressively numerous, industrious, theatrically flamboyant, and brazenly visible group—each one of the women of course desperate, ill, and tragic. The overall South Main cultural tone of the period grew largely out of their nighttime (and in fact daytime as well) presence. Thomas had for some while been speaking about the situation with the police department and with members of City Council. It wasn't the immorality of prostitution that concerned him, not relative to South Main issues, it was its off-putting ugliness, the varieties of additional criminal activity that accompanied it, and in consequence its overall hindrance to revitalization. Flagrant street prostitution was needless to say an impediment to investment, a discouragement to others to do as he had done, to buy one of the street's ratty old buildings and rehab it for living space or business.

Which would not itself have been much of an issue for Thomas, certainly no matter of emergency; he *liked* the absence of people down there. Except for the few old-timer business operators still hanging on, for whom he'd developed a considerable regard, Thomas would personally have preferred the street remain relatively

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unpopulated, the way he'd found it. Ungentrified. No cutesy bullshit. But the problem was that the very fabric of the area was deteriorating. Many of the vacant buildings along the street were literally rotting away due to water damage—unrepaired roof leaks, *collapsed* roofs in numerous cases. And they were burning as well, due primarily to their being open to vagrants, who set fires for cooking or for warmth. Or for the drunken hell of it. A number of the district's buildings had already been lost. And Thomas had developed too hopeful an interest in the architecture and the history of the street to ignore the factors that endangered it. Saving the street would require an infusion of people and investment, and in order for that to happen, the hookers would have to be made to move along elsewhere. Hence his endeavoring through various departments to influence their doing so.

So in time the RMC sent Doris Allaway down to see him. She arrived in a very prim business suit and heels—a manner of dress she adhered to on every such occasion and that alone revealed her psychological distance from the grungy South Main milieu she'd been assigned to work within—as a participant, was the idea, as a part of the struggle, the South Main pioneers and her pulling together for common objectives . . . that sort of thing. But she was an abject foreigner to the whole business, a benighted innocent, and she could not disguise it. A foreigner not only in comprehension, but more important: in sensibility. Utterly untuned-in. Which showed not only in her aloof boardroom attire, but in her general demeanor and in the apparent absence within her of any intuitive grasp whatsoever of the issues at play.

Thomas told me that when after a little polite pitter-patter they sat down to talk about the hookers, Doris pulled out a pad,

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placed it on her tightly pressed-together knees, held over it a pen at ready, like a diligent student preparing to take classroom notes, and then looked up at him and asked, “Now why exactly are you concerned about prostitution here on the street?”

Thomas said he felt as though he’d been asked why sunshine is a good thing. Or why he’s in favor of breathing. Or why such activities as for example thievery and murder are socially problematic. Or any other kind of stupid question that, at least outside a philosophy class, no sensible person would waste time asking.

And Doris seemed every bit as opaque about such other matters as would come up: how anti-neglect ordinances are useful in addressing the loss of historic structures, or why South Main, neglected for decades, could benefit from an allocation of capital improvement funds, or why a concentration of arts activity could enhance the street’s vitality . . . It was as though she’d been sent to plow a field without a plow or dig a hole without a shovel. Doris was not a stupid woman, not in general, but she’d come to her task without the necessary equipment, the necessary mental temperament, to fathom the most obvious issues. Or perhaps it should more charitably be asserted simply that Doris was out of her element. *Way* out of it.

During their meetings about these and other matters, Thomas would talk with her, as would others later on, as patiently as he could, with as much kindness as he could call up, restraining his exasperation as well as he was able, but Doris never developed a feel for any of it. Not ever.

I’m sure none of us would have intended she find out about it—no one would have wanted to hurt her feelings—but alas The

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Allaway Cretin, pathetic creature, was not long in becoming aware of the smart-alecky appellation we'd furnished her. Regrettably, such things do tend somehow to surface.

Whether in direct connection with the distress we knew this must surely have in some measure caused her, or whether for reasons entirely extraneous to her South Main experience, poor Doris suffered some sort of emotional breakdown. A rather severe one, if the reports of her sudden bizarre behavior were at all accurate: one whole afternoon at work weeping noisily and without pause in her little cubicle, refusing to say why but wailing throughout about how desperately she loved everyone, and then soon after working virtually all night long at the office, composing incoherent proposals to City Council about marginal or even nonexistent issues . . . and other strange behaviors of a more personal nature, things that need not be recounted here.

She was hospitalized for treatment, psychiatric. Here in Memphis very briefly, and then she was transferred by her parents (Doris was unmarried) to the care of a doctor in her hometown out of state.

The RMC put no one in her place, thereby leaving South Main unliaisoned. Which was by and large a great relief to us.

Doris—we'd out of shame ceased calling her The Allaway Cretin—was gone, we assumed forever.

But five or six months later she returned. Not to her position with the Commission, but to Memphis. I believe she'd taken a job in the office of some East Memphis CPA, a woman she'd known from before and who was, I suppose out of an admirable kind-heartedness, willing to take a chance on her; Doris as I recall had some level of academic background in accounting—a province incidentally in

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which her rather formal wardrobe might have been more, as it were, fitting than on South Main.

When it came to our attention she was back in town, we invited Doris to a Saturday meeting of our newly formed South Main Street Neighborhood Association. (Which at that time had a population of about five, but hell you have to start somewhere.) We wanted to extend to her a little kindness of our own, to give her to believe we'd appreciated her efforts with us on behalf of the district, and to help undo, we hoped, some of the unpleasantness associated with the nickname she'd so unfortunately found out about. We were prepared to explain that the name was by no means in wide parlance, that few of us had ever actually heard it used, and that in fact we didn't know who might have made it up to begin with, that it would surely have been only a friendly joke in any case, a bad one albeit.

Doris very cordially accepted our invitation and on the scheduled day arrived a comfortable five or ten minutes late to join the rest of us already gathered upstairs in Thomas's building. She was attired as usual, notwithstanding the casual Saturday-afternoon nature of the event, and even though she'd been told explicitly we'd all be in jeans and that she needn't dress up.

We had a necklace we'd pitched in together to have made for her. A dainty gold chain with a tiny dangling charm in the shape of the South Main Association logo, inscription on reverse: *Thank you, Doris.*

When we gave it to her she beamed. And teared up too.

She then did something very surprising. She removed her suit jacket. Beneath was a blouse that buttoned in back. She asked one of us to undo the top few buttons, which when done revealed on her upper back a tattoo.

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The Allaway Cretin, it said.

In very fancy letters.

With little pastel roses all around.

--- END OF SAMPLE ---

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