

The Accusation from page three

She'd begun to nod off when a buzzer sounded on the metal door to the lawyer consultation room. A tall man with salt and pepper hair walked in.

"I'm Rex Willard, your counsel. I'm going to need to ask you some questions. They're preparing a case to take to the D.A. I've seen their statement of probable cause. They're going after you for vehicular homicide – maybe murder. But they're releasing you pending formal charges. So we're getting out of here. We've got a preliminary hearing in three days. The judge will decide if they have enough to make a charge stick."

Back at Willard's office, Donna struggled to come to grips with the nightmarish developments.

Accused of killing a man, bashing him with a van – the same man who advised her to junk the thing, which is back haunting her.

She provided every scrap of detail that she could to Willard, and he seemed to believe her.

"What baffles me is why they think I'd want Ed dead. What possible motive could I have?"

"Seems like the same tipster who called in the description of the van and the plate number also provided that, too," said Willard. "Told them you and Willard were an item once, and you never forgave him for breaking it off."

"That's such bull!" she replied. "We went to lunch a grand total of

once. He told me he'd started dating someone."

"We'll just have to get to the bottom of this," said Willard. "We've got some excellent investigators, too." ***

The Honorable Judge Kelsey Vaughn listened as the state presented its witnesses: Deputy Ray Adams and Detective Brad Benson, a Department of Motor Vehicles functionary who testified that Donna was the van's last registered owner, and a forensics examiner who stipulated that the hair found in the headlight was that of Ed Gant.

But Willard had his own stable of witnesses, one of which owned a used auto parts business.

He would testify that he sold a 1999 Ford transmission to Ed Gant for \$300. Willard also presented Gant's company bookkeeper, who told the court that she went back through the records and never found a transmission repair bill for a Donna Bingham. Could it be that unbeknownst to Donna, Ed fixed the van and kept it on hand for scurrilous activities, like using it as a mobile meth lab?

Then Willard produced a representative from Milwaukee Mutual, a life, auto and casualty company who underwrote a \$250,000 life insurance policy on Ed Gant. The beneficiary was one Maria D. Wells, also known as Ed Gant's significant other. She was known to

law enforcement agencies across the Midwest by a string of aliases. Seems she couldn't be there for the proceedings, as her whereabouts were unknown.

The district attorney, thoroughly out-lawyered and embarrassed by the proceedings, moved to have the case dismissed, which Vaughn quickly agreed to.

When all the facts were unearthed, it turned out that Ed Gant was as shady as park full of trees. He did indeed meet a woman besides Donna, and she persuaded him to cook methamphetamine out in the National Forest in Donna's old van. Their product was distributed by a man named Richard Shackleton, who also had a side business going on

with Miss Wells. The two schemed Ed's murder and the plan to pin it on Donna, who Maria had always suspected of being Ed's one true flame, something Maria deeply resented. It was Shackleton who called the Sheriff's Department with the tips.

Attorney bills notwithstanding, Donna had one more little problem that needed to be addressed. The court wanted to return the Windstar to her, its rightful owner. She grudgingly accepted its return ... and then insisted on watching it being crushed into a six-by-six-foot cube.

This time she got paid for it, and she used the money to buy a horse.

DNR biologist finds "holy grail" of rare plants in state natural area

A Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) conservation biologist has found the "holy grail" of a rare plant in Wisconsin: A green violet long thought gone from the state, but growing by the hundreds in a State Natural Area (SNA) in west central Wisconsin.

The species (*Hybanthus concolor*) was last documented in Wisconsin in 1958 when it was collected from a site in Grant County. That site was severely impacted by grazing and the species was thought to no longer grow in the state.

"It was pretty exciting," said DNR Conservation Biologist Ryan O'Connor. "It really drives home several things, including that there are still important things to discover on State Natural Areas and that our SNAs are vital to the conservation of plants and animals, some of which are found nowhere else in the state."

This isn't the first rare plant finding within Wisconsin's State Natural Areas – 75% of wildlife species listed in Wisconsin as threatened or endangered, and 90% of state-listed

plants are supported on State Natural Areas. These sites, owned both by the DNR and more than 50 partners, represent Wisconsin's best native forests, wetlands, prairies and geological and archaeological sites. Their primary purpose is to maintain this natural heritage for future generations.

O'Connor's discovery also underscores the importance of having experts conduct "biotic inventory surveys" to document the different rare species on state-owned lands and assess how the natural community they are part of is faring.

Natural communities are defined by the soils, geology, plants and animals that evolved together to form different types of prairies, wetlands and forests. Wisconsin has more than 100 of these distinct communities, some of which are globally rare. The state legislature created the State Natural Areas program to conserve examples of these communities 70 years ago.

The DNR uses the inventory survey information to inform master plans determining how to manage proper-

ties and prioritize the attention they receive.

Green Violets At A Glance

Green violets are native to the eastern United States. Wisconsin is at the very northern edge of the green violet range. Across its range, green violet is limited to rich mesic forests on limestone soil. Many of these sites have been lost to logging, grazing and invasion by weeds like garlic mustard and honeysuckle.

Most violets have white, yellow or purple petals and green sepals, but green violet has much less showy flowers. The plant's scientific name, *Hybanthus concolor*, refers to the petals and sepals being the same color (green). The word "concolor" is Latin for "same color."

Like other violets, green violet has a gelatinous substance, called an elaiosome, attached to its seeds. The elaiosome is rich in fats and proteins, which attract ants. The ants bring the elaiosomes back to their nests to eat, and as they move them around, distribute the violet seeds.



Photo credit: Wisconsin DNR
Green violet, a species last documented in Wisconsin in 1958, was found this spring on a State Natural Area in west central Wisconsin by DNR Conservation Biologist Ryan O'Connor.

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