

## **Dead Pool**

**By Jerry Peterson**

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“Cactus, we got a floater here!”

Jim ‘Cactus’ Early mopped a splash of water from his weathered face as he pulled the tiller on the outboard. The Riley County sheriff drove his john boat in the direction of the voice, sloshing his craft across the current of the receding Big Blue River that in the past days had backed up Manhattan’s main street, ten feet deep where Early was.

“Whaddaya think?” he called out to his search partner, the county coroner, a real doctor and surgeon who had a far better boat than Early.

“A woman,” Doc Grafton called back. “Must have got caught in the eddy by the corner of the building and slid out into the alley.”

The last of the rescues had been made two days ago, people who had come downtown when the gathering deluge – eighteen inches of rain in some areas over the past weeks – roiled out of the Big Blue’s mouth, when the cries of “flood” moved from house to house. Businessmen and their employees did what they had done in more years than they liked to remember. They made a dash for the downtown, watched the muddy water inch up over their door sills, then worked like frightened ants, moving merchandise, furniture, and records to the upper floors of their buildings. Now Early, Grafton, a city policemen, and two firemen patrolled in a private flotilla, inspecting damage, seeing whether they had missed anything in earlier sweeps. Other than odd pieces of furniture, and cases of beans and peas from the Hamilton Grocery that hadn’t got moved in time, all anyone had found in the flood waters were two drowned dogs and a cat, the cat a firehouse pet.

Grafton, short necked and chubby from too much good eating, had managed to back his Chris-Craft into the blind alley and now leaned across the stern with a gaff, hooking at the coat of what Early could see, from the length of the hair floating on the water, was indeed a woman. He lashed his john boat to the coroner’s and scrambled across.

“Give you a hand there?” he asked as Grafton pulled the floater close.

“Yeah, let’s see if we can haul her in. You grab one shoulder, I’ll get the other.”

Early dug the fingers of one hand into the shoulder of the coat and, by stretching, got his other hand under the woman’s arm. “Gawd, she smells of fuel oil.”

“Whole alley does. Water here’s greasy with the stuff. On three now . . . one, two, three!”

The men lifted. They hauled. Early slipped and fell backwards, and the body came over the stern on top of him.

“Sorry about that, Cactus,” Grafton said as he rolled the dead woman off Early, to the side and onto her back. “Oh Lord.”

“What is it?”

“I know who this is . . . Sue Trimble, Sam Trimble’s girl. This is gonna break his heart.”

The sheriff pushed himself up. He raked off his storm hat and again mopped at his face and mustache. “What the heck was she doing down here?”

“Shouldn’t have been here at all. She used to work for that insurance man – what’s his name? – office on the second floor, right around the corner. He fired her last week.”

Early, on his knees now, with the lightest touch, moved the woman's soaked hair away from her face. "Aww jeez, I'm surprised you could recognize her, nose mashed in like that." He rolled the woman's lips back. "Cut up on the inside of her mouth. Teeth broken out."

His fingers played over the chin. "Busted. You think the water could have slammed her into a telephone pole or something?"

"Possibly," Grafton said. He lifted a coat sleeve, and a dead hand twisted at an odd angle. He felt along the wrist. "Damn, it's broken."

The coroner/surgeon let the hand down and felt his way along the other wrist. "Jesus, it's broken, too."

"You don't suppose," Early said. He brought his hands up in front of his face, crossing one wrist over the other.

"Only thing that makes sense. Cactus, this was no accident. She was trying to protect herself."

"So she saw it coming."

"Yeah. I noticed something when she was still in the water. Didn't think about it then. Help me roll her over."

The bottom of a boat, even the bottom of a Chris-Craft, offered precious little room to work over a fish of this size, yet the lawman and the coroner managed. Grafton took a penlight from his slicker pocket. He leaned down and shined the light over the back of the woman's head. He parted the hair and parted it again. "See this?"

"I do."

"Cuts in the scalp. Not real deep. Blood's washed away. No surprise there."

"Gimme your light," Early said.

"Huh?"

He wagged his fingers, and Grafton laid his penlight in the sheriff's hand. Early spun the light around and aimed it over the coat at the mound of the woman's shoulder blades. Something, like a small diamond, threw back a glint of light. Early picked at it. He got the bit in his fingers and examined it more closely with the penlight's beam.

"Glass?" Grafton asked.

Early turned the small shard. "From the thickness, I'd say standard old window glass, and I do mean old. You see the wave line in this piece?"

"Uh-huh. Not particularly helpful."

"Think about it. Cuts in the back of her head. Glass imbedded in the her coat. She came through a window backwards."

Now it was Grafton who raised his hands in front of his face, who crossed his wrists.

"That's right," Early said. He sat back on his haunches, the receding flood waters lapping at the sides of the boats. "She was standing with her back to a window, trying to protect her face when someone hit her for all he was worth."

"Could have been a woman."

"All that damage, I doubt it."

A boat's motor droned in their direction. Early twisted around in time to see volunteer fireman John Daws' fishing scow.

"John!" he called out, hailing him.

Daws cut his engine. "What you got, sheriff?"

"A body. Find the police chief and tell him we need him."

"Right." Daws, a powerfully built man, a butcher at Hamilton's, twisted the throttle on his Johnson outboard and plowed off toward the lower end of town.

"So we got us a murder," Grafton said.

"Dutch has. This is his jurisdiction. So what do you know about this girl?"

Grafton pushed himself up onto the stern seat. "More than maybe I can tell you."

"What's that mean?"

"She was kinda one of my patients. Good kid, smile like Sunday morning dawn come early."

"She have a problem?"

"Yeah. Sue messed up her life some, but she was trying to get control. I offered to find her a scholarship at K-State, so she could study nursing."

"But the problem."

Grafton, bone tired like Early, rubbed at the stubble doing its best to become a beard. "Pregnant," he said.

"Oh jees. She married?"

"No."

"That's a problem, all right. You know who the father is?"

Grafton took a pack of Camels from an inside pocket. He shook a cigarette out and offered it to Early. He waved it off.

"Sue wouldn't tell me," Grafton said as he clamped the butt end of the cigarette in his lips. He found a matchbook in another pocket and struck fire. Grafton sucked in the flame. "Just said she was thinking of getting rid of the baby. Sue was along about six months and beginning to show."

"That would create talk." Early fanned the smoke away. "How can you smoke that stinky thing?"

"Habit I picked up in the Army, when everybody was giving out free cigarettes. You got 'em, too, and don't tell me you didn't."

"I gave most of mine away."

Grafton blew a lungful of smoke out the corner of his mouth, away from Early. "Well, Sue was afraid her daddy was going to find out about her . . . you know. Old Sam, he's a straight-laced Baptist. Babies out of season go against his religion."

"And she wanted you to do . . . ?"

Daws' scow boiled back up against the lazy current and into view. He slowed the motor, but held enough power to keep from drifting. "Sheriff! Dutch says he's got too much on his plate with this flood. Says you're on your own with the body. Says you should drive your boat up to the park, then get the volunteers up there to take the body to one of the funeral homes. Doc Grafton will take it from there."

"Doc's with me."

"Oh, well, I guess you're all right then. I'd help, but I've been called over to the pumping station, see if we can get the city's water back on. There's going to be a helluva a lot of mud to wash away." With that, Daws turned his scow and powered off.

Early glanced at Grafton as he pushed himself up. “Guess it’s you and me, Doc. Take us out of the alley slow, then I’ll unleash my boat and we can tow it.”

Grafton moved forward to the captain’s seat. He pressed the starter button and a hundred horses rumbled to life. He shifted the transmission and eased his mahogany craft along, hugging the wall of the Wareham Hotel, to keep from scraping the sheriff’s boat against the Tyson Building opposite. As Grafton broke out into the current carrying flotsam toward the receding river, Early untied his boat. He brought the tow line to the stern of the Chris-Craft. More out of curiosity than anything else, Early glanced over at the second-floor windows of the Tyson, their sills a few feet above the lapping waves of chocolaty water. “Doc?”

Grafton twisted around.

“I’m worn down. Am I seeing right?” The sheriff pointed to one of the windows.

“The whole thing’s gone.”

“At’s what I thought. Idle over there. Let’s check it out.”

Grafton sized up the distance between his boat and the wall, then played the current and his steerable propeller to ease the boat’s gunwale up to the Tyson.

Early vaulted from the boat, through the window, and splashed down inside.

“Much water in there?” Grafton called out.

“Foot, maybe foot and a half.”

“Whose office?”

“Ahh . . . Sign on the door says A.L. Sutton, Wabaunsee Mutual.”

“Oh, damn, that’s who Sue worked for. What do you think happened to the window?”

Early leaned out. He ran a hand along the frame. “Judging from the splintering, I’d say the window went out, not in.”

“You don’t think – ”

“One coincidence I can accept, but two?” Early wobbled his hand. “Maybe you ought to come on in. We’ll look around together.”

Grafton handed in a line, and Early tied it to a soil pipe coming down through the corner of the insurance office from the floor above. When he sloshed back to the window, Grafton gave him a second line and waved at a box safe in the opposite corner. Early roped the boat to that. While he secured the line, Grafton came through the window. He looked around. “Austin’s gonna have some wall damage, but these old piney board floors will dry out all right. Judging how he’s stacked the file drawers on top of the cabinets, he was betting the water wouldn’t rise any more than four feet in here. Safe for all the floods we’ve ever had.”

“So you’ve been in here?” Early asked.

“Couple times.”

“How recent?”

“Month ago maybe. Austin is a K-State alum, like me. I was hitting him up for a chemistry scholarship contribution.”

Early slogged over to the wall on which hung a battery of framed certificates and plaques. He read them. “Get anything?”

“Dinged him for a hundred and felt damn good about that because he usually gives his money to the athletic department. He was a conference all-star in baseball in, what, ’Forty-Six?”

Early took out his spectacles. He hooked the bows over his ears, then looked closer at the

certificates. “Yup, here it is. Big Eight all-star, and the ’Forty-Six team photo. . . . We got insurance licenses here, various sales awards from Wabaunsee. Is everything here that you remember?”

Grafton splashed along as he moved about the office. He studied the desk, up on cinder blocks to keep it out of the water, furniture piled on top, the bank of filing cabinets, their drawers removed and stacked. He came over to Early and gestured at the two pegs in the wall, beneath the all-star plaque and the team picture. “Those aren’t for hanging coats, my friend.”

The sheriff half glanced at him. “That’s what I would have thought.”

“No sir. Austin had a ball bat, signed by all his old teammates, and he displayed it on that wall, laid it right across those pegs. He was damn proud of that bat. Aww, he probably took it home.”

“Could be, but what about this?” Early took off his spectacles. He put them in his glasses case and the case in an inside pocket. “Suppose now that this man’s the baby’s father. He married?”

“With two kids. Usually keeps a picture of the family on the desk.”

“Suppose he’s the father of that baby, and this woman confronts him, says ‘get rid of your wife and marry me or I’ll tell her and she’ll wreck you in divorce court.’” He backed Grafton across the office and positioned him with his back to the window. “You’re her. I’m him.”

“I’ll be damned if I’ll let you ruin me, and I see my chance.” Early reached back for an imagined bat. He whipped it around in a full-force swing.

Grafton jerked his hands up to protect himself, then peeked between his fingers. “Damn, that’s scary. But you don’t have any evidence. We don’t even have the bat.”

“He doesn’t know that. He’d have thrown the bat out the window to let the flood carry it away. But, Doc, trash gets hung up. We could have found it. You know where he lives?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go see him.”

\* \* \*

Early and Grafton, still in their slickers and boots, stood before a post-war two-story on the high ground behind the college. Early knocked on the door. He struggled with his boots, pulling them off while he waited for someone to answer. “Doc, we won’t be welcome inside in mud kickers. Better get outta them.”

The door swung open. “Yes?” a woman asked, thirtyish, attractive, her face showing a degree of weariness.

“Missus Sutton?” Early asked.

“Yes.”

“We don’t know each other, but I’m Sheriff Early and this other fellow, he’s Doctor Grafton. Is your husband at home?”

“He’s resting. He’s spent the last two days checking up on his insurance customers, getting help for those who’ve had losses.”

“I expect he has, but we kinda need to see him for a minute. Would it be all right if we came in? We’ll leave our boots and slickers out here on the porch.”

“Sure.” Dahlia Sutton held the storm door open while Early and Grafton tossed their gear

aside, then she stepped back to let them pass.

“Nice place,” Early said, glancing around the entryway.

“We like it. Just go on in the front room. Austin’s on the couch.” She pointed them to the side as she called out, “Austin?”

“Yeah?”

“Company.”

“Who is it?”

“The sheriff and Doctor Grafton.”

“Oh, good Lord.”

Early heard the frame and springs of a couch creak, and feet slap down on the floor.

“Sorry to disturb you, Mister Sutton,” Early said as he came on into the front room, all the furniture standard except for the small television set built into a cabinet, the cabinet similar to the big Crosley superheterodyne radio Early had in his own front room. He nodded at the TV.

“You get anything on that?”

“A lot of snow, but WIBW comes through most of the time.” Sutton pulled on his shoes. “We’re up pretty high here, and I’ve got me an antenna on the roof, half the size of a football field. What can I do for you?”

“We’ve got bad news.”

“Doesn’t everybody with this flood?”

“I guess so. Sue Trimble . . .” Early tugged on his mustache.

Sutton glanced up from his lace tying. “Yes?”

“She’s dead.”

“Oh damn.”

Dahlia Sutton went to her husband whose face had gone starch white. She sat next to him and put an arm around his shoulders.

“You tell her father? You tell Sam?” Sutton asked, a trim man but muscular, not much changed from the player in the team photo. He rubbed at his face as if that would make what he had heard go away.

“That’s our next stop,” Early said, “but we wanted to talk to you first.”

“Why?”

“Well, she used to work for you.”

“That’s right.”

“Did you know she was pregnant?”

Dahlia Sutton’s face clouded. “Yes, we knew. And, yes, Austin told me he was the father. Why do you think he’s sleeping out here on the couch rather than the bedroom? And you see those suitcases over there?” She waved an index finger toward the entryway.

“Oh.” Early glanced at Grafton, then at the suitcases, brown leather jobs and, by their sizes, men’s suitcases. He wandered away, across to the fireplace where he studied paintings of two children.

“Ours,” Dahlia Sutton said. “Our son and our little girl.”

“They’re not here?”

“They’re over at my parents’ house.”

“Ahh, while you two get things worked out.” Early turned. “Mister Sutton, Miss

Trimble was murdered in your office.”

“That can’t be.”

“With your baseball bat. One of the firemen found it down by the trestle, backed up in a pile of trash. The flood water hadn’t washed away all the blood and tissue yet.”

Grafton arched an eyebrow.

“We know she confronted you.”

Sutton picked up an envelope from the floor. He fiddled with it. Early saw from the return address it was something from Sutton’s insurance company.

“That wasn’t it at all,” Sutton said, twisting at the envelope. “Look, she was trying to figure out what she wanted to do, maybe get an abortion.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hey, I admit it. We had a helluva row when I told her that Dahlia knew everything, that there was no coming together for either of us, that she was on her own, but I told her I’d pay for it.”

“Lot of yelling, I expect,” Early said.

“Pretty horrible. I finally told her she could go or stay, and I got the hell out of there.”

“When was this?”

“Two days ago, when the water was rising, when I was setting everything up high in case the flood got in the office.”

“So you left and she was still there?”

“That’s right.”

“She could have thrown all your files out the window and created real problems for you.”

“At the time I didn’t care.” Sutton tossed the envelope down. “So you think I killed her?”

“Oh yes.”

“Going to arrest me?”

“Mister Sutton, I’m too tired to do that. I just want to go home and sleep ’til maybe fall or winter. But when I can prove to a jury what you did, you can bet your insurance license I’ll have you in jail.” Early started toward the entryway with Grafton hurrying after him. Then Early turned back. He winked at Sutton. “You have yourself a good day now.”

Outside, as the two walked away, carrying their gear rather than wearing it since the last of the showers had moved on and the sky to the west had cleared, Grafton prodded Early. “He’s gonna get away with it, isn’t he?”

“Jeez, never would have expected he’d fess up to his wife. That had to be hard.”

“Well, now, Cactus, if it came to a divorce, he’d lose everything, so it was in his best financial interest. Wouldn’t you have told Thelma if you’d done that?”

“I wouldn’t have got myself into the kind of trouble that I’d have something to tell Thelma.”

“True, true, I know. . . . I just had a thought,” Grafton said, slowing his pace. “Suppose it wasn’t Austin? Suppose it was his wife?”

Early hitched up his trousers. “I wouldn’t put much of a question mark over her name.”

“Yeah. She wouldn’t have done it. She’s got old hubby-boy by the short hairs.”

At the end of the walk, the men threw their muddy gear into the back of Early’s Dodge

pickup and got inside. The sheriff aimed the truck toward an older, lower section of town.

“Fifteenth Street, you said?” Early asked.

“Third house on the right. Sam’s lived there ever since he and Gale married. When she died, he couldn’t bring himself to leave. But back to Austin, you’re never going to prove that one, are you?”

Early jerked his truck around a shagbark hickory limb down in the street. “You think he was the only one with an office on that floor down there that day, getting his stuff up from the flood?”

“No.”

“I don’t either. Somebody was there who heard the row. I’ll bet your next county check on it. If we can get the glass breaking to when Austin was yelling –”

“Oh, that’s good,” Grafton said.

Early spun the steering wheel to the right. He brought his truck onto Fifteenth Street and waved at a woman pushing a swath of wet leaves from her walk. Early guided the Dodge to a stop before a bungalow that showed its age.

He and Grafton pushed past a wringer washer and a rusted glider as they made their way to the front door. There Early knocked.

“Minute!” came a man’s voice from inside.

The sheriff shoved his hands in his back pockets and rested himself against a porch pillar. He glanced around. “Must save paper and string. Look at that stack of newspapers. Mercuries, right?”

Hinges squealed as the door opened. “Whaddaya want?”

“Mister Trimble?”

“That’s right.”

“Sheriff Early and Doctor Grafton. Can we talk to you a minute?”

“I guess. You want to come in?” the little man asked, slightly stooped, worry lines etched deep into his forehead. He pushed the rotting screen door open, then stepped aside.

The bungalow didn’t have an entryway. Early and Grafton came right into a front room as deep in litter as was the porch, and musty. Or was it cat pee? Early wondered.

Trimble set a stack of Devotional Quarterlies off a chair so the sheriff could sit down, then shooed an arthritic cat from a second chair to make a seat available to Grafton. For himself, Trimble settled on a couch through which a spring had poked its curled prong. “You look like you been run hard. Maybe you’d like coffee or something? Coffee’s on the stove. I kin warm it.”

“Doc?” Early asked.

Grafton waved a hand.

“It’s the Christian thing to do, to offer,” Trimble said.

A Bible, of the old family type, lay open on a table beside the couch. Early took it in. “You read the Good Book?”

“Ever’ day.”

“Me, too. I’m reading about old Job and his troubles now. Where are you?”

“Exodus.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Chapter Twenty.”

“Let me guess.” Early leaned back. He closed his eyes, wondering if he could ever open them again. When did he sleep last, two days ago? Three?

“God spoke,” Early said, his eyes closed, “and these were His words. ‘I am the Lord, thy God who brought you out of Egypt. Worship no other god before me.’ Something, something, something . . . ‘Do not use My name in vain. Do not commit murder. Do not commit adultery . . .’”

The sheriff forced an eye open.

“You got most of it,” Trimble said. “Condensed it some.”

“A bit.”

“You know, don’t you?”

“That your girl was going to have a baby without benefit of a church marriage? Yes.”

“She was a sinner, always was. I tried to raise her right, but alone . . . just awful hard. Tell ya, she was bound for hell and there was no stoppin’ her.”

“But you did,” Early said.

Grafton’s head snapped around.

“You know that, too, huh?” Trimble asked. “Where did you find her?”

“Floating in the alley next to the Tyson Building, next to where she used to work.”

“Next to where she did her sinnin’ with that damnable insurance man.” The old man wiped a handkerchief at the end of his hawk nose.

“And you walked in,” Early said. “And you picked up that bat.”

“You know about that, too?”

“Mister Trimble, we have the bat, fingerprints and all. Exodus Twenty, verse Thirteen, and again in Deuteronomy, Chapter Five . . . ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ to quote the old King Jimmy version. They say confession is good for the soul. You want to tell us about it?”