

# **RAGING CITY**

**By**

**Andrew Kass**

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The deliverymen arrived early, just after dawn, while the air was near fit to breathe. A listless breeze off the ocean filtered through the narrow strait of Brighton 10<sup>th</sup> Street, barely a whisper once the engine gasped itself still. Truck doors slammed, and those echoes trickled away too.

The refrigerator emerged iridescent from the back of the truck as Paul and Karen Snather watched from their front stoop. Paul stood propped against the door frame, bleary from hearing another furious night in the streets, maybe the Black Pajamas, or local Cossacks, or Iron Fist, perhaps, or the Sabra gang that had been moving down from Gravesend. Whoever made them, the sounds were terrible, even over the white hum of the air conditioner, even in the snug backwater of Brighton 10<sup>th</sup> Street. Now there was no trace of struggle in the red morning streets, just this tall, pale monolith descending on the lift plate of the truck.

Paul hugged Karen close so he could feel her body, smell her strawflower hair. This moment had cost three months of overtime, stamping real property permits and variances to the City as late as six o'clock some days, then having to get home through the combat zones after the sun was down. He had had to play subway roulette once when a gang of young Ravers stormed the D train, stepping off at Avenue U then diving back through the closing doors when they followed him onto the platform.

Paul and Karen came down the two steps to make way for the handtruck. Karen asked the delivery backs, one florid, beefy, the other lean and swarthy, to make as little noise as possible. Trina and Todd were still asleep. Trina had gotten in late, as usual, nervous hours after the ruckus. Todd had not been out of his room since dinner. The red deliveryman grunted, then

cut the turn left from the entry hall too sharply and swore as the handtruck crunched a corner of the partition wall.

“T’s okay,” mumbled Paul, separating a five from the bills in the pocket of his robe. That would leave them twenty after the Black Pajama tithe at the head of Emmons Avenue. Let them work out the split.

The little assistant snapped steel retaining bands around the box with a pair of shears, then holstered them to help lever the refrigerator into its port in the back wall of the kitchen. The cardboard cap came off, the skin fell away, and the heavy waxboard skidplate slid out from under. The assistant snaked a wiry arm behind the gleaming white enamel appliance and plugged it in. A motor surged to life deep within its glassy skin.

“That’s it,” grunted the red-faced man, casing the small, cluttered kitchen. The old fridge displaced part of the dining nook halfway along the right wall. Paul handed him the first ten. The back jammed it into his pocket and started out.

“How about taking the old box?” Paul suggested with the help of another ten.

The deliverymen exchanged a shrug. Red Face took this bill as well and jammed the truck plate under the old box as the assistant rocked it back. Then he paused thoughtfully.

“Did you get the On-Site Service Plan?” he asked.

“Yes,” Paul affirmed as Karen cooed over the interior of the new fridge.

“What the ching-dong-ching is going on?” came a nasal whine from the hallway. Trina, on two hours’ sleep.

“Mouth, missy,” Karen snapped, just missing her registers of real anger.

“What about the Enhanced On-Site Service Plan?” the swarthy one asked of Paul.

“So what the paid oral sex is—ooh!” Trina, in semi-diaphanous yellow nightshirt, stopped to gape at the gleaming white fridge while the deliverymen gaped at her nubile form.

“Never heard of it,” Paul replied, also appraising his daughter. At seventeen, Katrina was a year younger than Karen had been, three years younger than the Paul that pumped his seed into his sweet crazy little chick and future wife. The view from this nightgown, as from any number of her shifts, bikinis, halters and tights, revealed that Trina physically took after her mother with just a dollop of Paul’s height.

Red Face picked up the story.

“The Enhanced On-Site Service Plan adds replacement protection for flood, lightning, and other acts of God,” he explained.

“Does it?”

“Just twenty bucks more on signing this receipt,” affirmed Red Face.

“Aw, Dads, you’re not gonna let’m ching ya with’at old line,” Trina said, still a bit wool-mouthed and wobbly.

“No.”

“You really never know what can happen,” leered Swarthy.

“No,” Paul said, arms crossed, “you don’t.”

They wheeled the old box around the party wall to the hallway, past the living room, closet, out the door, down the two steps from the stoop to the short walkway across the green concrete lawn, through the open gate in the 6-foot chain link fence to the curb by the lightpole, where they stopped and deposited the old box.

“What are you doing?” Paul asked rhetorically.

“Removal’s in the Enhanced Service Plan,” grinned Red Face, his silver incisors glowing rosily in the risen morning.

Paul saw red.

“Give it to them, Paul,” Karen said conversationally. “You know what’ll happen.”

He knew. Los Olvidados would find it, and take over a little more of Brighton. He held up the last five to Red Face, who accepted it without a word. The old refrigerator, veteran of six years of beer, soda, coldcuts and leftovers, buttermilk, and ice cream, rose into the mouth of the truck. Bastards’ll sell it for scrap, or sell it to the Homesteaders to fix up and re-sell, or if they get lazy just dump it into Sheepshead Bay.

When signing the delivery slip, Paul couldn’t resist asking for his Enhanced Service contract. Red Face calmly wrote “ENHANCED” in large block letters on Paul’s receipt before climbing into the truck.

Only after the fumes dissipated from the outlet to Neptune Avenue did he hear Karen yell “The BOX!”

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There was no telling when Todd would emerge, though his room, just past the living room, was closest to the commotion. So Paul and Karen removed the heavy top and bottom from the box walls, folded the walls flat and taped them into a bundle while Trina was in the shower. They set the bundle in the living room to go out when and if the Garbage came around, stocked the new refrigerator, and, at last, sat down to a breakfast of boiled eggs, toast and coffee.

Trina was still under the spray. Paul had to leave for work, and had not yet showered. The price of this change in routine: he was running late, and Trina was up to her morning swim.

Karen at least didn't open the beauty shop till 10. Trina would be washed, oiled and whatever else by then and, with any luck, ready to help at the shop.

He sprayed extra deodorant under his pits, pulled on a polo shirt, white with thin brown horizontal stripes, brown slacks, brown socks, brown chain-buckle swag belt. As he fastened his white Ertech traction shoes, father's day gift from Trina with Todd and his only fashionable accessory, Todd's door creaked open just enough to proclaim the waking of his son. Paul tiptoed over to the breach.

"Morning, son," he crooned.

A mumble issued from within, followed by faint snicks of metal upon metal. Wisps of solder and epoxy swathed in incense escaped the aperture to Todd's world. That was about all that escaped other than Todd, who emerged infrequently at that. Paul and Karen had not been formally admitted to Todd's room in three years; Karen, the defter sneak, would go in to "clean" when Todd was at school and find a workbench with electrical, chemical and plumbing components, in later days a model cruise ship undergoing superstructure fitting.

A month before the end of sophomore year, Todd came home early one day and never went back. By some arrangement his lessons arrived by mail every afternoon. The following morning Todd's answers would be on the kitchen table, waiting for Paul to post it.

But it was a typical midsummer morning. No envelope. No Todd.

Todd waited till he heard Dad go off, then quietly as possible slid his door shut and locked. Trina was probably jamming herself in the shower again, but he didn't need to go so bad yet. There was always the old salad oil container.

It had been a long night's work, but his shock vest was nearly done. He had solved the insulation problem with slivers of an old slicker and a ground wire to his starburst belt buckle.

The electrolytic elements of his sweat would increase with the adrenal rush of fear, complementing the battery layers to deliver a wicked shock to a hitter and stun him just enough for Todd to run away. And while probably not bullet- or knife-proof, it was surely more resistant than his skin. He could, just possibly, go back to school—

Kidding who? The vest's effect relied on surprise. The only surprise in the long grind of school was in getting home unscathed.

So the vest was heavy, and not a thing of beauty, but it was done. What next?

The rockets burned predictably and were stable enough, and he had figured how to modify his radio into a transmitter, but the on-board telemetry system was still out of reach. There was still grinding and wiring to be done on the parabolic dish, but the thought of satellite transmissions, radio waves bounced high above the wretched Earth into clear black space, was just too depressing. Likewise his latest model, the *S.S. Norway*, with its two winged funnels, sweeping black hull and vast promenades aft: He didn't feel like doing anything just now.

His eye fell on his journal. The black marbled cardboard sheened softly in the lamplight at bedside, below the shuttered window. It asked to be held, opened, examined. Written to.

He sprawled on the bed and propped the composition book on his knees to block out the jumble of his workbench. And read:

*Blaine Brandon stood at the rail of the ship and smiled. The day was clear and bright, and the buildings around the bay looked bigger and sharper than seemed possible. As the cold wind whipped the flaps of his P-coat, Brandon smiled because he was leaving.*

*Good-bye to the buildings, bridges and monuments of the great harbor!*  
*He stood at the rail and felt master of it all.*

It was okay as far as it went. Blaine Brandon was generally the most resourceful and cocksure of Todd's heroes. For some reason Brandon annoyed the hell out of Todd this morning. He wrote:

*As the ship cruised out from under the bridge, a black helicopter that had been shadowing the boat suddenly dove straight for Brandon's spot at the rail. Brandon barely realized in time to draw his 9mm Browning and squeeze the trigger. Crack! – crack! – crack! – crack!, the pistol report fought the harsh purr of an M-2. Bullets zinged off the deck plates all around Brandon, but he held his gun steady as the chopper swooped closer. Finally a shot struck home, and the black helicopter erupted in orange flame.*

*But Brandon only had a moment to enjoy the spectacle before a rotor fragment cut through the air and sliced off his head.*

There. Todd sat back from the tight curl of his writing posture. He could describe his hero's head rolling around on the pitching deck, but that would be showy as television. Leave it to the imagination.

Meanwhile he heard Trina emerge from the bathroom, arguing with Mom as she dressed for work at the shop.

No one beat Trina at school; she was popular. She had protected him when she could, but since she was usually off fucking beneath the boardwalk or somewhere she wasn't much help most of the time. Still, she asked nothing of him. He didn't mind Trina.

Mom was heading back toward the kitchen now where Dad's noises were coming from. She would be opening the shop at 10. It was now 8:30: a good night's work. Todd tossed the

book, shut the light, peed in his salad oil bottle and sacked out as Dad cleared his throat explosively and said, “Is Todd—?”

Karen intercepted Paul at the kitchen portal in a tight, voluptuous hug.

“Sleeping in.” She gazed at the gleaming refrigerator. “It’s bea-oo-tiful, Paco,” she sighed happily. “Now we can really stock up on store days.”

Paul kissed her and she drew on it. She twined about his solidity, even dry humping his good-naturedly inflated whacker. Two children in the house, but Mom and Dad could have gone at it right then and there for all the kids noticed or cared.

Still, you never knew about Todd. Paul half suspected the boy of spying on them, through the party wall or his closet.

So he kissed Karen to the front door, promised he wouldn’t be late, and set off for the City.

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The shops on Brighton Beach Avenue were just rolling up their shutters and the first sidewalk sellers just arriving when Paul crossed the shadow of the El. A train dozed out-of-service on the end track above him as he squinted down the stippled tunnel for the moving shadow of a train from Coney Island. He decided to duck into Mrs. Felzer's for coffee now and a potato knish for later.

The high narrow shop was thick with bodies, flour and oil. The summer sun gave this a bright yellow light through the hand-lettered windowpanes that made the shop appear ready to meld all the contrasted faces into one timeless present within breastworks of all sorts dumplings. On winter Sundays, when Paul and his father would stock up during halftime of the Giants game, the room would be close and bare and thrill his young nose, twice broken now but still a noble instrument, pugnaciously Roman and flared, flaring now at the doughy smells of the knishery.

“Next.”

“Sweet black coffee and a potato knish,” Paul told the acned counterman. He was irked that no one remained here who knew him by name, Paul Snather, a steady customer for thirty-odd years. He glanced at the camera trained on the counter, and imagined Arnold the baker and the others of his youth gathered around the monitor it led to, saying “Nu! That’s the little Snather, all grown up yet,” and waving. Yeah, right. He paid his money and took the parcel away to the elevated.

He puffed up the long, screened stairway to the waiting room, then through the turnstile and up another flight to the platform just as the stainless steel train rolled in from Coney Island.

He could see a reasonable amount of light through the thick steel mesh jacketing the windows, so the train wasn't close to full. But this was the head of the line, and it was a long way to Manhattan.

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Inside the train car was an eerie mix of intermittent fluorescence and heavily screened daylight. The daylight blue dots in the steel mesh rolled up to the window tops and disappeared, replaced by dun-colored walls of the trench just past Avenue H. By the time the doors rattled open at broad Newkirk Avenue station there was very little sunlight past the inside window seats.

Few commuters were reading anyway. Most in the silent mass wore earwigs, tiny radio receivers that hooked around the ear with a small tube to the eardrum. The pop radio stations had been distributing free pretuned left and right earwig sets since Memorial Day. Since the units did not have to be connected for the stereo filters to work, it was not unusual to see the younger clerks and secretaries wearing a red WWWOW left earwig and a yellow WBAD earwig on the right, their lean bodies twitching silently to different rhythms. The train was thick with these and stolid older workers by the time the train left Newkirk, so that with the crowd and the uneven light it was pointless to read what little was actually in the newspapers. Paul usually tuned his street-bought earwigs to WROK, the oldies rock station:

*That's just the way it is...*

Soulful voice, glistening piano arpeggio—

*Somethings will never change...*

Intermittent light and dark outside—

*That's just the way it is...*

Wrenchingly bad stretch of track—

*Oh, but don't you believe them.*

A Tuesday at summer solstice: A time to be cutting out to the beach, as it had been when Paul was young and Karen was his girl rather than his wife, an unimaginably long time ago. He could close his eyes and briefly recall this song rippling from the radio as light danced on the water. Then the train shuddered again and he was back inside, compressed sweating in his seat, surrounded by blank, gum chewing faces as the voice now in his ear says:

*That was Bruce Hornsby and the Range from 1987 with "The Way It Is" or the way it was or whatever. Right now it's twenty-nine minutes past eight on a hot Tuesday morning, Ken Crane here with you as we head into summer on WROK-FM....*

Out of the tunnel and onto the Manhattan Bridge approach. Paul could feel the train slow to a crawl, its wheels groping at the wavy track on this wretched old bridge. The peepholes brightened with a daylight grayed, it seemed, by the decrepitude of the bridge. Paul hated this part of the ride, the groans and shrieks of metal debating mortality today reminding him of the noises of last night, noises that melted away with their perpetrators and the night but refused to leave his mind.

Too much. It was getting to be too much. He turned up the earwigs:

*...to which the Mayor replied, 'Well, there you are.' The banquet raised seven million dollars for the Mayor's Discretionary Services Fund.*

*On the national scene, President Rubin met with Congressional leaders to stump for approval of the Treaty of Greenock, leveling international tariffs. The President, speaking in the Oval Office, called this:*

*'An historic opportunity to cut a fair deal among all nations.'*

*Turning to sports, it was Sharks 5, Yanks 3 at the Stadium last night...*

Through the pinholes he could see the shape of the old Brooklyn Bridge, now restricted to pedestrians. Bits of Governor's Island beyond that, and gray blobs in the bay, ferries, barges or Coast Guard ships.

Descent to the tunnels past bare grim apartments, blackened hulks, Manhattan side. At one time Paul would have walked sunny Lafayette from Canal Street station past the courts of Foley Square to the Municipal Building, but no more. The police had secured and "sanitized" the courts and civic center, but the two blocks between Canal and the Tombs checkpoint were patrolled by the T'ai Tong, whose right-of-way tributes were high. The subways, though, were anybody's. Paul changed for the downtown local at Canal for the one stop to Brooklyn Bridge.

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The station steps emerged at the east end of City Hall Park, near the vine-choked wreck of the old Tweed Courthouse, gray ghost of another century's graft. The derelict building had been the site of a pitched battle almost exactly one year ago between Police Assault Units and the Savage Monkey Gang in which the Savage Monkeys had been annihilated and a dozen Assault Troopers killed in the rubble. Now the deserted-looking hulk housed an inner electronic nerve center for the whole downtown area.

Paul knew, having stamped the documents transferring title to the Police Department and the permits to run electrical and signal trunks. He remembered the morning after that rumble, the sharp tang of gunsmoke, the quiet surrounding the gory blanketed shapes borne out of the killing ground on litters. In that silence he had heard echoes of the Raging that had consumed Brooklyn barely fifteen years ago.

He turned away from that tomb and pristine white City Hall with its delicate bulletproof windows and laceworked clock tower, its remote gun emplacements throughout the gleaned

vegetation, walking across the cracked asphalt plaza toward the cathedraline towers of the Brooklyn Bridge and the great embracing mass of the Municipal Building.

A spiked iron fence girded the curved flanks of the great-shouldered building, broken only by one central checkpoint for admission to the arched courtyard. Paul stepped across bare Lafayette into the vast shadow. A group queued at the gate for the hand scan; no one from his department. Paul shuffled across the cobbles to join the line.

Then, from high above, a crack and clitter of breaking glass. Paul looked up in unison with everyone else at street level. What drew his attention, as if for the first time, was the sun-polished dome with some great romantic statue atop the main pin-head tower. It positively shone, that helm of gold on sandstone scrubbed to alabaster, that foolish figure of heroism poised at the pinnacle like the summit of civic aspiration.

About halfway down, a window had been bashed out of the building's concave chest and a tiny figure was frantically waving and shouting at the yard.

"They're all in it!" echoed a high female voice, disembodied and partially muffled as the waving hands disappeared inside. "I have proof—"

The last was cut off. The daily business of checking in resumed.

Paul laid his right hand on the hand scanner. The cop's monitor read something out and beeped agreeably. Paul ambled across the cobbled courtyard toward the entry right of the arch. Halfway there, he heard a further crash above and a scream descending.

Paul looked up, and saw a gaping mouth and two bulging eyes holding the sound in his ears. The sight remained fixed in his head after the envelope of flesh lay smashed on the cobbles not ten feet away. His hands had gone forward in a repulsing gesture when he stopped, which

was how his left hand happened to stop at the same exact point in space as a rubber stamper which had erupted from the woman's mortal remains.

He looked at it for a moment only, till reflex pulled him back and slipped the stamper into his knish bag before the guards and others converged. Only then did he notice his clothes were spattered with blood.

Hands on his shoulders, biceps, back, steered him and propelled him away. The image of the woman's open mouth and eyes and dark flaming corona of hair hovered over him, though in his last snapshot view there was nothing but a dark red mat on the shoulders of red and white stripes soaked with burgundy. Her blue skirt had fallen back over its waistband on impact, leaving white stocking legs crookedly exposed. Dead as they get, and yet still descending, worse, suspended, a dangling question whose dot, the stamper, had fallen to him.

Paul let himself be led out of the sun to a cool stone bench amid the shady cobbles of the center arch.

A long Irish blue-eye face in his.

"You all right, buddy?"

"Yeah, yeah," Paul said irritably, focusing back on the red blood on his white and brown shirt, dots dappling his brown slacks, glaring like small wounded mouths from his glossy new Ertech traction shoes. And on his skin, dark red pox he dared not touch.

"You wanna take the day, Paul?" the guard said, checking his printout. "We could square it with your department."

Over the bridge, back into the black throat of Brooklyn—

"No," Paul said firmly. He rose, clutching his lunch bag. The cop stood back, a head shorter than Paul, and tugged the back band of his blue beret.

“Well, anyway, you’ll need a change of clothes,” he said. He looked back to where the swarm was now being parted by green-jacketed paramedics. They were in no hurry. The platoon of Blue Berets attendant seemed content to let the crowd control itself. Nobody who saw the corpse up close was hanging around.

“Hey, Duffy,” Paul’s cop yelled, “we got any spare coveralls in the ready room?”

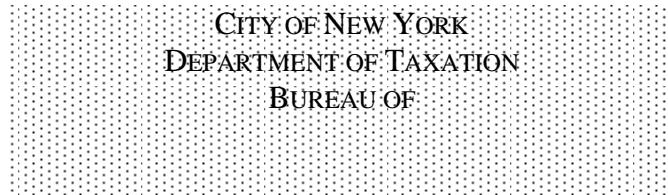
“Yeah, I think so,” Duffy replied from the edge of the crowd.

“C’mon,” Paul’s cop said kindly, “we’ll getcha changed.”

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Paul got his first glance at the stamper while alone changing at a locker stall in the security ready room. After stripping down to his briefs and socks he stopped, unable to resist a peek inside his knish bag. He pretended to adjust his socks, opened the bag, and peered inside.

The stamper had improbably landed face up, so that the letters in the tan shadow were indistinct and backward:



Footsteps. He crushed the bag closed and practically jumped into the navy blue coveralls, wriggling his arms in as the door behind him opened. His blue-eyed Irish cop entered with a woman about Paul’s age wearing a loose, high-collared blouse and puffy Arabian trousers in matching copper/red/turquoise stripes to complement jet black tresses and azure eyes.

“This lady will take you upstairs, Paul,” the cop said brusquely. “Janet Kinsolving of Internal Affairs.”

He left without more, leaving tall, sun-burnished Janet Kinsolving smiling enigmatically while Paul zipped the coverall up tight, catching a few chest hairs in the process.

“Relax, Paul, I’m a doctor,” Janet Kinsolving said in a flat alto. Her finely-downed bronze arms swung from behind her back, revealing a small black leather bag. “Have a seat for just a sec so I can take your blood pressure.”

Paul sank back to his stool. Janet Kinsolving pulled over another next to him and straddled it, producing a blood pressure cuff and stethoscope from her kit. She wrapped the cuff around his bared arm, suffusing the action with a top shelf civet perfume that set his balls a-tingle. Easy boy. She swept her glossy black curls back over her shoulders with an easy gesture and set the earpieces of her stethoscope. He felt the lean athleticism of her body in these actions, followed the copper bangle necklace to her long, cordy neck, angled jaw and somewhat horsy face whose smoothness was pleated for smiling … till he met her turquoise eyes. Completely opaque.

His eyes dropped to the floor: the knish bag, uncrumpling. She pressurized the cuff, tight, then slowly bled the air out. Paul could not read her response as she listened, but he could see that the dial needle began to hiccup at about 180, ticking downward. The sleeve relaxed until she opened the valve at the end of bulb, removed the cuff and then took his wrist in strong fingers to check his pulse. Paul admired the cool fingertips on his wrist.

Janet Kinsolving sat back and removed her stethoscope, carefully avoiding sharp contact with the copper bangle necklace. Paul realized she wasn’t making notes; the necklace could be a wire.

“How do you feel about what you saw out there?” she asked.

Paul thought about it, separating his vague personal fear from the vision of the falling woman.

“Well, I’d as soon have been somewhere else,” he said tentatively.

Janet Kinsolving’s smile lines deepened.

“I’m sure.” She snapped the kit closed and, head down, asked, “Did you know her?”  
“Kinda hard to tell,” Paul said, seeing the mouth again, descending. “I work on 24 in the south wing, and she was somewhere in the center—“

“22,” Janet Kinsolving said, and he could have sworn he heard a buzz from the copper bauble earrings. “Department of Taxation. Her name was Greta Hammond. She had been with the department for twelve years.”

Paul shook his head.

“Don’t know her.” Again he was aware of the opacity of this woman’s eyes. Special lenses, behind which she could study and, who knows, transmit his responses unchallenged. He met the blank stare. “What happened?”

Opaque-eyed or not, she looked away.

“Clinically, we’ll never know,” she dissembled, just a bit off-key. The aqua lenses returned riding a puckish grin. “I guess in layman’s terms you’d say she flipped out.”

Paul nodded as though he understood. Sure he understood. Life sucked: everything was falling to shit. Without gas the rubes upstate could neither farm nor commute, so everything was collapsing into the City, which was itself collapsing in from the edges a neighborhood at a time. What he did not understand was why the woman jumped to such an end with all the drugs available, why he felt such anxiety about an ordinary official stamper, and why he felt such reluctance to turn it in.

"I had better get upstairs," he said, casually scooping up the knish bag with his clothing.

The bloody mess in his hands drew Janet Kinsolving's impersonal attention.

"Let me get you a bag for those," she said tonelessly, casting about the room. "In fact, we can probably get them cleaned for you right away. Where the security guys get theirs done." She came up short, looking at him standing across the room clutching his bloody clothing. Something changed in her aspect, a feeling which could find no outlet in her face no matter how hard it poked and tugged. She clasped her hands on the handle of the medical bag before her. "You ... you know, this trauma may stay with you. Nightmares of course. That will fade with time. There will also be an inquest. You will be req— asked to testify. Please don't feel that it's unmanly to become upset and seek help. Feel perfectly free to come to me for cover."

She extended a card to lure him out.

"Cover?" Paul asked.

"Cover?" she echoed blankly.

"You said 'cover,'" Paul affirmed, edging forward.

The graceful arm drew the card back.

"I'm sure I said 'consultation,'" she said.

"Sure you did," Paul agreed slyly, close now, plucking the card. It read:

**JANET KINSOLVING, M.D., Ph.D.  
MEDICAL OFFICER  
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS  
CITY OF NEW YORK**

in plain black, with the City crest in the top center, the Indian and the Dutchman flanking a menagerie on a shield, Municipal Building address lower left, phone number lower right.

"Appreciate it," Paul said, and put the card in the breast pocket of his sharp blue coveralls.

As he did so she reached for the bundle, bag, clothes and all. Paul pulled away. The dead eyes arched a significant look.

“What are you holding back, Paul?”

Paul fought back a wave of panic. She doesn’t have goddamn x-ray eyes. She’s a doctor. A psychiatrist, no doubt. Give the bitch one she can swallow.

“Oh, heh-heh,” Paul shifted into embarrassment. “I was a skinny kid in high school.

Guys were always trying to take my clothes to stop up toilets and stuff. Here.”

He handed over the bundle of clothing, retaining the bag. She accepted the clothing and the story, which was bullshit: Paul was a pretty big guy then and trimmer than at present, and while he had not really been a persecutor he sure watched his friends do it more than once. Kinsolving pointed at his bag.

“Lunch?”

Paul grinned weakly.

“As much as I can eat.”

She jammed the trousers into the shirt pulled inside-out so the bloodstains barely showed. They then walked the dreary yellow hallway to the elevator bank.

“I’ll have these sent up this afternoon,” Janet Kinsolving said.

“Don’t rush,” bubbled Paul, rocking up and back in his dab-cleaned traction shoes. “This security jumper is pretty cool.”

An elevator arrived bearing five people who gave ground to the blue jumpsuit, insignia or no. Could be an Assault Trooper. This thought cheered Paul as he stepped in and pressed 24. As the door slid closed on Janet Kinsolving and his bloody clothing, the Ertech traction shoes on

his feet and the knish bag in his hand were the only threads leading back to Brighton Beach and the start of this bizarre morning. It was barely nine-thirty.

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The Division of Real Property was an archipelago of desks, chairs, partitions and paper. Ignoring the shopworn furnishings, a goodly amount of the Division's activity could be set in domestic back yards or parlors. For every person reading, stamping or phoning on business, there were three visiting over coffee, skimming the paper, or placing social calls. This took place in an unstated rotation system whereby everyone ended the day knocking off roughly the same amount of work.

Paul stepped off the elevator at 24 and proceeded down the long south hallway that ended in double glass doors bearing the legend **DIVISION OF REAL PROPERTY**, to which someone once added with paper and tape, "NO FAKE PROPERTY ALLOWED". He entry drew whistles from the gallery.

"Smart threads, Snather!"

"Changing yer stripes, Paulie?"

Thracia Moldover stole to his side like a ponderous sylph.

"I lo-ove a man in uniform," she cooed, caressing his bicep.

Paul laughed. It felt good.

"So where'd you get the blue suit, stud?" probed Thracia.

"From Security," he teased.

"Security?" exclaimed Murray Blumkin, the roundest man on Earth. "Those fartballs wouldn't give toilet paper to each other." Murray wagged bushy eyebrows that comprised the only hair on his head. "I hardly reckonized you."

“Wha’ happened to yo’ clothes, Paul, honey?” purred Thracia.

The joy of return drained from Paul. He shrugged off Thracia with an affected nonchalance.

“I was too close when that woman jumped,” he murmured, and edged by Thracia to his desk midway back to the right of the center aisle, just before the pebbled glass of Deputy Assistant Commissioner Zopko’s office.

“That was you was almos’ hit!” cried Filippo, the office boy. “God had you in his sight, man. He mus’ got plans for you.”

Filippo was a disciple of Jehovah’s Children, the result of a leveraged buy-out of Jehovah’s Witnesses by The Children’s Crusade, Inc. Taking after the latter organization, he did not so much proselytize as find the hand of Divinity in unexpected places, and never spoke ill of others, which made him very popular.

Paul grunted non-committally as he sat down. The window near his desk was open. Even back from the ledge, it was a long way down. He shuddered involuntarily, then almost jumped at a hand on his shoulder.

Filippo stepped back, his fine olive face oval in dismay.

“Sorry, Paul. I was gon’ aks if you wanted coffee.”

“No,” Paul snapped, then settled back. “Sorry, Filippo. It was a long night, and ....”

“T’s okay,” Filippo grinned, brown eyes shining. “Even in the worst things there are signs, man. Maybe you been elected to the Host.”

“Filippo! Get in here.”

Deputy Zopko's nasal whine grated the collective office nerves. Most supervisors used the intercom, a personal word, or even a look and a gesture to summon. Angelo Zopko almost never left his office and was by all accounts barely smart enough to use a phone.

Filippo held his smile and knocked on the metal door. The same voice grunted "Come." Filippo entered and closed the door.

The ginger-haired lump of flesh behind the wrapper-littered desk studied him through narrow blue eyes over pudgy, freckled hands. Zopko wasn't exactly fat; it was as if he lacked bones, and was left with one organ structure flowing loosely into the next.

"You akst for me, boss?" Filippo inquired lightly.

Zopko held his murky gaze a moment longer.

"You're a Jehovah's Child, aren't you, Filippo."

It wasn't a question. Filippo could just make out a file jacket on the baggy lap.

"Yes, sir."

The deputy's flabby lips stretched to something like a smile.

"That means you're not allowed to rat on people, right?"

Filippo again was sure that his answer was unnecessary.

"We don' speak ill of our fellow mens," reported Filippo.

Zopko flipped the blue folder shut and tossed it on the desk. The name on it was  
**FILIPPO SALTERRA.**

"Good," he said, rocking. "Then I got a little errand I need you to do for me. Strick'ly on the Q.T. Catch."

A small manila envelope sailed from Zopko's pudgy paw. Filippo caught it, a dense lightness like folded paper.

“Now in accordance wit’ your laws I’m gonna tell you what it’s for,” Zopko continued mutedly. “You’re goin’ just past the Manhattan tower of the Brooklyn Bridge to meet a guy wid a yellow knit hat and you’re gonna buy me a fin o’ slam. You gonna bring it right back here and not tell a soul, otherwise your God’ll getcha. An’ even if he don’t, I will write you up so bad you won’t work again ever. You got that, Filippo?”

Filippo’s flesh crawled. Slam was the Devil’s own narcotic. But Zopko had him.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“Good—“ Zopko started, then visibly thought better of sweetening the pot when he didn’t have to. “Your password is ‘The Dow Jones is down,’ then he’ll say ‘You gonna buy?’ Got that?”

Filippo repeated it. This was so wrong. How could God allow it to be?

Zopko told him to get going. He went.

\*

Getting to the bridge was easy. Outside the Municipal Building checkpoint Centre Street was bare; what automotive traffic remained was no longer permitted on the Brooklyn Bridge and pedestrian traffic was no longer safe there. A lot of surveillance was brought to bear on keeping the riffraff back from the Manhattan approaches, and City employees took advantage of this to lunch on the near side of the Manhattan tower in good weather.

Filippo knew this as he crossed to the Bridge’s walkway island. He also knew that 10:15 was too early for lunch, leaving him the only soul in sight. The walkway extended its emptiness to the dual arches of the stone tower opening before him like the path each solitary life took to election or damnation. Reverend Fulcher had said you don’t tarry or turn back on that path. Filippo took heart and walked up the sun-blanchéd way.

And yet with all the mystery of God's plan and its manifestations, all of Reverend Fulcher's wisdom at interpreting signs and laying bare the evil from the good, Filippo here was pressed into the service of abomination by the very purity of his belief with no guidance as to how to translate his knowledge of the wrong to action against it.

The sun was so bright everything looked clear up close. Far away was hazy, the brown haze that kept the very old and the very young indoors. That kept his Papa indoors, and Mama with him.

He could refuse to go ahead. Put the little envelope back on Zopko's desk and refuse to do this wrong, now or ever.

But Zopko had the power and knew it. He had Filippo's jacket, and knew that with one brother in the Marines, another two lost in gangs and one sister gone Olvidado, with Mama sick and Papa on disable pension, Filippo was supporting what was left of the family and could do nothing that would threaten his position.

Maybe the yellow hat man would not be there. Then Zopko could curse all he wanted. Filippo would be blameless. He opened himself to the sun at this frail hope, and carried it up to the tower promenade.

The tower loomed above him like a stone cathedral of silence. Distant traffic, transport mostly, crawled soundlessly through the haze of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway across the brackish river. Nothing stirred in the air or on the water, whose tidal noises were far below this dread height.

Filippo's own thudding heart, his own labored breathing, the soft tread of his crepe-soled skips on old dry wood conspired to drown out the thought of any other presence on the Bridge. As he ascended into shadow he saw a large plaque on the tower wall before him. The big letters

praised THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE and somebody named R – O – E – B – L – I – N – G.

Filippo had learned to read Scripture largely by rote, and new words in strange contexts confused him. A man and this Bridge, he pondered as his feet led him around the sunny right side of the tower promenade. He didn't see the man in the yellow knit cap until he was nearly upon him.

The yellow knit cap, much larger than a human head, lay on a pillow against a wrought iron bench support. A thin, veiny brown arm was thrown across a face showing a broad, flat nose and a beard and moustache that formed a thicket over the mouth. The man wore a white polo shirt and sky blue slacks, rubber soled sandals on wide white-soled feet. The visible arm shifted upward enough to reveal a baleful brown glare.

“You got somet’in’ to say to me, boy?”

The voice was Jamaican, maybe Rasta. Filippo groped for the words Zopko had taught him and the voice to utter them.

“Yes, uh, the .. uh, the Dow Jones is, uh, down,...” he trailed off, hoping still to be rejected.

Yellow Hat laughed wide yellow teeth, a couple gold: nasty laugh.

“Ho, boy, our fren’ a beeg mon, now, sendeen a chile to get his jones.”

“You got somethin’ to tell me?” Filippo prodded, a final thrust against despair.

“Oh, yes, leetle mon,” crooned Yellow Hat, sitting up to show the Mark 4 machine pistol in his hidden hand. His bottomless brown eyes locked on Filippo. “You wan’ to buy?”

Filippo sighed and proffered the envelope.

Yellow Hat pinched its girth between fingers like calipers. Then he flashed a nicotine leer and plucked the loot from Filippo.

“You gwan be sure an’ deliver de whole t’ing, chile,” he jibed. Filippo nodded grimly.

“Mebbe you wan’ a taste for your time and trouble?”

Filippo chilled at the contemptuous laugh and knew his shock and disgust must have showed.

“Wal, if you don’ taste, leetle mon, dat pig must hov you by de balls,” Yellow Hat bantered. The machine pistol disappeared into a voluminous trouser pocket as he rose, a head and a hat taller than Filippo. “Take good advice from an old mon of t’irty-t’ree: don’t let no one take you by de balls.”

And with that, Yellow Hat shuffled off toward the center span, almost around the tower before Filippo found his voice.

“Di’n you forget something?” he croaked.

Yellow Hat’s head lolled back toward him.

“Just sit and read de newspaper, chile. I am sure you will find somet’ing you like.”

He disappeared behind a yellow grin.

Filippo focused on a folded newspaper wedged into the slats of the bench. Just to collect himself, he sat. Looked out at the great barren harbor, at the helicopters prowling its tawdry landfalls, at the fortifications of Governor’s Island, the tiny figurine of Liberty, a ghostly sliver of Staten Island across the humid murk. What breeze there was had vanished, leaving a heat that did not penetrate him. Finally he reached over and rifled through the newspaper. There was a gap with a plastic sheen a few pages in.

How could such a thing be possible? Even if God did not refuse tools of damnation to the damned, weren’t the police monitoring the Bridge? Perhaps it was like Filippo’s

neighborhood, where the cops came too late or cruised by the dealers unseeing. His last hope was that he would be arrested, if only to deny Zopko his drugs.

Filippo arose and walked back toward the forest of tomb-gray buildings. The whole of it was strangely silent, marred only by the occasional black sedan of some bigwig or the blue and white police cruisers and motorbikes on the Drive. Before the gas riots the FDR Drive was an artery of cars flushing through the edge of the City. Now only the wealthy, the powerful and the cops patrolled the East River perimeter.

Returning alone to this cloistered place from a vacant bridge with a newspaper full of drugs, Filippo felt certain of capture. A red flasher and siren could not have made him more obvious. Here was a young Hispanic whose civil service status could not be known at a glance. He must be stopped.

But he descended to the island, the plaza, the empty street, and came to the checkpoint without a challenge. Holding the paper folded in his left hand, he put his right on the scanner. The Blue Beret at the gate passed him through with a bored wave.

When he got upstairs and passed the paper to Zopko, the deputy assistant commissioner laughed.

“Stay,” he told Filippo, tearing at the flat plastic wrapper. “I’m gonta show ya what *good* is.”

Zopko took a mug and a bottle of clear liquid from a lower desk drawer. Opening the bottle released malign spirits of alcohol. He poured a long splash into the mug, feverishly intent on the ritual. Then he drew out what looked like a letter opener with a shallow trough where the blade should be and slid it through the sparkling brown powder on the plastic sheet with his left hand while his right produced a lighter and torched the alcohol alight. Zopko’s eyes riveted on

the measure as he carefully tapped its contents into the mug of alcohol. An evil, bittersweet mist rose from the mug. Zopko took the mug and sucked greedily at the pale gray vapor, barely exhaling, drawing deep again, faster, more urgently, now not exhaling at all but drawing deeper, deeper, red flashes from his neck up to jelly cheeks as though he would explode, his eyes glazed with the mist.

No! screamed Filippo's brain as he held his breath and edged away as far as he dared. Soon his lungs were screaming too, for air, any air, even if it were laced with the poison consuming Zopko. He did not breathe. He closed his eyes and prayed:

*Oh God of the Heaven and the Earth, of beast and man, please hear the prayer of your servant—Help! The damned are reaching out to grab me, they want to make me their stooge like Leon or Paco with the Young Bloods and I'm trapped, I'm drowning, I can't breathe—*

And the answer in his mind was, Breathe.

Filippo exhaled, and gulped a lungful of air that tasted like old, stale office air. He opened his eyes. Zopko was sprawled back in his chair, twitching. His head lolled over the chair back, unseeing eyes facing the glazed partition, a white froth at the open mouth that panted with the shallow heavings of his chest. A last wisp of vapor rose from the mug and vanished without a trace.

Filippo felt a slight tingle at the base of his skull which could have been slam or fear. He gathered himself to keep from shaking and edged toward the door.

“Thank you, Filippo.” Zopko’s voice issued thinly from the supine bloat. “This is a good deal. Good good deal.” He still hadn’t moved.

Filippo put his hand on the doorknob.

"Hand on the doorknob," cackled Zopko hollowly. "I can see everything. Tell you what. Take the rest of the day off."

Filippo fled. Out in the examiner section he felt eyes that would not meet his. Down the center aisle of the office were the double doors with pebbled glass panes, like the tower apses of the Bridge, the gates of his prison. But he could not, *could not*, speak ill of Zopko or Yellow Hat without being exiled and damned. He needed to testify to Reverend Fulcher, but Reverend Fulcher spent Tuesday on pastoral rounds and rarely returned before refection. Mama and Papa would wonder why he was home early; he could not tell them. He had to talk, about anything, to anyone, or he would exit those double doors for the last time.

Paul Snather was at the coffee nook right of the doors, sipping coffee and staring off toward the windows. Filippo slunk over, suddenly recalling how Paul's working day had started.

"Hey, Paul. You still thinkin' about that lady?"

His voice sounded high and reedy to him. Paul snapped to.

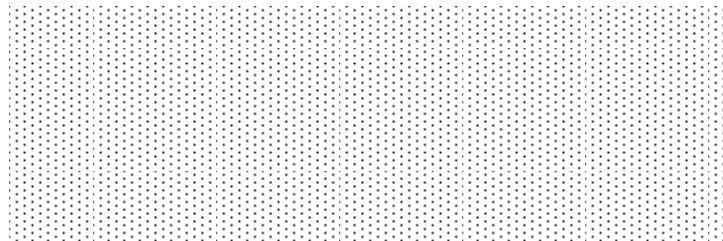
"Oh, now ... well, yeah, I guess." Paul's long body shifted to another angle in the blue jumpsuit. He shook his head. "A lot I don't understand. Hey, you get around, Filo – who's on 22, near the middle of the Centre Street side?"

"That's mos'ly Community Lesion stuff," Filippo answered, glad of the new subject.

"Community Liaison? Not Taxation, Finance...?"

"Nah. They upstairs with the Comptroller's office," Filippo replied eagerly, too eagerly to ask why Paul brought them up.

Paul frowned at this information. He had read the stamper, and hid it in plain sight among his own racks and trees of official stampers. The new addition said:



CITY OF NEW YORK  
DEPARTMENT OF TAXATION  
BUREAU OF DIST. COLLECTIONS

Permit No. \_\_\_\_\_

What was it doing in Community Liaison?

"You know anybody down there?" Paul asked, noticing that Filippo looked a bit taut after dealing with Zopko all morning.

"No," said Filippo. "They don' have much to do with the other departments."

Paul set down his coffee cup as firmly as a foam cup can be set down.

"I'm going to pay my respects," he said, and pushed through the double hallway doors.

\*

When he stepped off the elevator at 22, Paul wasn't half as conscious of the blue jumpsuit as the people he encountered. Two men walking by in a discussion espied his blue form and stiffened, treading away on eggshells. Paul took on the slouching, purposeful walk of authority, and turned right, toward the building center.

The high transomed hallway was empty. He could hear the faint trill of someone in some inner office whistling "Heartbreak Hotel", and wondered for the dozenth time why he was sticking his neck out. Turn around. Dump the stamper and forget about it. But forgetting the wide eyes and open mouth plunging at him wouldn't be so easy. He had been marked somehow to take up the burden, but he still had a choice. His Ertech Tracsoles squeaked on the floor, filling the hard marble and tile hallway. His white Ertech Tracsoles, with their hundred tiny mouths of blood.

Through a set of fire doors he found a middle-aged woman drinking from a water fountain.

“Excuse me,” Paul said, “I’m looking for Community Liaison.”

The woman glanced back, inhaled some water and spluttered bolt upright.

“Community Affairs, two doors down on the left, and it’s the whole right side of the office,” she gushed as soon as breath allowed.

“Thank you,” Paul said.

He headed in the indicated direction toward a patch of daylight, aware that the woman did not move until he was through the glass door.

Paul and Community Affairs had an immediate effect on one another. The moment Paul walked in he was struck by the tense silence of a minimal rank and file bent over paper-laden desks in the deep, sparse square of bright linoleum. He also noted that all the desks faced away from the window, toward him. The windows let out to sky interrupted at this height only by the Woolworth Building, the State Office Building and the empty Financial Center towers further west. The buildings were intrusions on the sky Greta Hammond saw on commencing her last day of work.

On the other hand, Paul’s intrusion had a more dramatic impact. One clerk peeked up from his papers and instantly burst from his seat, drawing looks and like responses from the other suddenly pale clerks.

“Yes?” squeaked the first clerk.

“I’m looking for Community Liaison,” Paul said.

The first clerk, a slight beige and brown man somewhere between 25 and 45, scuttled around his chair to gesture toward a glass-paned door in the right-hand wall.

“I’ll just tell Mr. Tidrow there’s a visitor,” he gobbled as the others resettled and tried to look busy while still monitoring blue-clad Paul.

"I'll tell him myself," Paul growled.

The first clerk immediately dropped to his seat. Paul slowly walked up the aisle between desks and file cabinets, noting the lack of chatter, the dearth of phones, the orientation of desks away from the windows, the palpable cowering caused by his presence.

Paul thought about keeping the jumpsuit.

He opened the unmarked door without knocking and found himself in a smaller version of the same room, the desks here ranked facing the door. The windows were left of the door; one near an empty desk in a middle row was boarded over. Paul walked down the center aisle; no one in this room looked up. They were all digging through files, referring to lists. As he turned toward the boarded window, a chesty voice from the back of the room challenged him.

"May I help you?"

Several clerks hopped in their seats, but kept their heads down. Paul stopped two desks in, one desk away from the window. He inclined his head to the right rather than turning, as he had often seen cops do. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a tall, broad-shouldered man with steely gray hair and impressive moustache.

"I'm here on the Greta Hammond matter," Paul growled. "Come to pay my respects."

"Hammond?" queried the other.

Paul had a moment of doubt, until he looked at the stamper rack on the end desk. One was indeed missing, a blank pair of smudged clips. He turned to face his interlocutor.

"Yes, Mr. Tidrow," guessing the name the turkey in the first room had mentioned, "Greta Hammond. A City worker of this department deceased as of nine o'clock this morning."

Use of the name had its intended effect. Tidrow blinked.

"Would you mind stepping into my office, Mr.—"

Paul fought back another warning rumble. Make up a name? Certainly not use his own. Nothing added to the record, yet.

“Certainly,” Paul snapped, and strode across to an open door in the wall opposite the boarded window.

The room was six feet by eight, little more than a closet, with no windows and only one door. Forced air and glary light came from ducts and fixtures in the dropped ceiling, oppressively close after the relatively high acoustic ceilings of the rest of the old building. Tidrow followed him in and firmly closed the thin door. With a wary green glare through bushy black eyebrows he gestured Paul into the one free folding metal chair among the file cabinets, then squeezed himself between the cluttered desk and a computer console to a sprung naugahyde swivel.

“You didn’t tell me your name,” Tidrow resumed from his throne.

“No, I didn’t,” Paul agreed. “I came to pay my respects to the co-workers of Greta Hammond only to have them deny they worked with her.”

“You mean the woman who jumped?” asked Tidrow significantly. Paul nodded. “Well, thanks for telling me her name, but all I know is I came in this morning and found a crazy woman tearing through our work. When I confronted her and told her to get out she threatened me with a letter opener, so I ducked out to Community Affairs and called—“ here Tidrow squinted hard through his brows at Paul, “—Security. They came up, and we tried to restrain her, but she broke free and jumped.” Tidrow’s gaze wandered off during this last bit. Almost to himself, he added, “Probably on drugs.”

It sounded reasonable as far as it went. What had Janet Kinsolving said about her? Paul, feeling foolish, sucked back his doubts, and pressed a further question.

“She was with the Department of Taxation. What would bring her here?”

That got Tidrow’s attention. He scowled and swallowed and again scrutinized Paul. Paul kept his face stony against the green probe, but had a vibe he would not want to be there when Tidrow found what he sought.

“It could have happened anywhere,” Tidrow said slowly.

As he finished speaking the intercom buzzed. Tidrow snatched up his receiver.

“Yes?” *Buzz buzz buzz.* “He has his payment?” *Buzz.* “So just stamp his permit and send him on his way.” *Buzz buzz buzz buzz buzz buzz buzz.* “I’ll be right there.” Tidrow slammed the receiver down, his face a furious red. “Would you mind waiting here?” he asked Paul and was peremptorily up and out the door before Paul could reply.

Not a good situation. Four walls, one door, no windows. One door, suspicious Tidrow and his minions and the black-eyed window that had seen a wrong done – but by whom? What if the real Blue Berets, or ATs, the Assault Troopers, showed up while he sat here like a duck in a Coney Island target booth?

Paul leaped out of the chair. He’d brazened his way in, he’d brazen his way out.

He felt the door tremble with shouting but opened it anyway, on this tableau:

Tidrow and a ferret-like man in a seersucker suit were standing over the clerk nearest the blank-eyed window. Tidrow had a hand on the clerk’s shoulder that on closer inspection was squeezing intermittently at her pressure point, causing the young woman extreme distress. The unoccupied desk between them and the window had been ransacked.

“You’re keeping Mr. Ballard waiting,” snarled Tidrow, oblivious to Paul’s quiet emergence. “What did she do with it?”

At that moment the slick-haired ferret man spied Paul and murmured something to Tidrow. The eyes protruding from that wedgy face had a brown, animal avidity that made Paul feel like an object, or food. He realized he'd better say something.

"I'll let you know if I find anything," he said.

And with that Paul turned to go, feeling all eyes on his back until he closed the connecting door to Community Liaison behind him. He easily passed through the furtive glances of the outer office, and soon he was out in the cool, musty hallway, breathing again.

He had not yet passed the water cooler when he heard the glass door whoosh open behind him and Tidrow call "Wait."

Paul came up short, pulled his poker face, and turned. But it was Tidrow who looked worried.

"Lissen, pal, I ain't gonna ask who you are or who you work for – I can guess – but, I just wanna ask, did they find anything down there?"

Paul smiled, back in the part.

"Like what?"

An elemental flash lit Tidrow's green eyes.

"You know damn well like what. A permit stamper. This gets out and the wrong people find it they can cut their own permits, and.... And, as you can see, it's holding up work in my department."

"We're doing our best," Paul said thoughtfully. "Checking all the lower ledges. The courtyard. Sewer grates. It's a big area and a small object. But we'll find it."

"Find it," Tidrow said fervently, leaning in. "Because if anyone else does, this whole city could blow."

At that moment the Community Affairs door whispered open again and the ferret man stepped out with a cordovan leather portfolio. Paul figured, hm, if he's going down, I'm going up, but to 23, in case anyone's watching. Thus preoccupied, he nodded in response to Tidrow's plea, only to notice that Tidrow was no longer there. In the bright patch outside Community Affairs writhed a scurrying shadow.

The oily visitor in seersucker and white patent leather had pushed the Down button. He affected unconcern at Paul's approach, but Paul had a feeling that he was being scoped long and carefully. The fleshy mouth, angled below a short, sharp nose, curled around the edges of a private joke. Paul pressed the Up button. Black parenthetical eyebrows wagged. The Up elevator came first.

Paul stepped into the elevator with studied nonchalance, punched 24, then fought a grimace and hit 23. Fortunately there was no one else in the car.

The Down elevator came shortly thereafter. The man in seersucker glanced at the other floor display out of habit. Stopped at 23. Not the first one the fake cop hit. Fucking amateur. Still, he had more on the ball than that pea-brain Tidrow. You could buy Tidrow but not the services you needed. The Boss would not be pleased.

Downstairs, he crossed the cobbled plaza where maintenance workers were scrubbing and a platoon of Blue Berets appeared to be searching for something small. He idly wondered if this was connected to Tidrow's panic.

The Criterion limo was waiting at the curb just outside the checkpoint. He opened the door, something The Boss never had to do, threw the cordovan portfolio onto the sofa and followed it in.

Collins had the partition window down.

“Where to, Mr. Giamba?”

Spencer Giamba stretched on the Caddy’s exquisite red leather.

“Home, Babe. And go slow.”

Giamba punched the combination that opened the bar while Collins pulled a lazy U-turn to pick up the Drive.

“Bad?” Collins asked conversationally.

“Our boy inside fucked up,” Giamba replied while dousing his scotch and ice with ginger ale. “Mr. B won’t be pleased.”

Giamba sat back and watched the stately white bonnet of the Criterion with its standing Cadillac medallion swing only the empty Drive as though on a movie screen. It was a long way to the panoramic windshield from the back seat, enough to play handball against the divider if you took out the bar and facing seats. He had mentioned that to Afro B, Afrodisio Ballard, his principal and indeed only client, who was considering ordering another from Brighton Coach Works on Neptune and Brighton 10<sup>th</sup>, built to those specs.

Yes, there were definite perks to working for the Boss of Coney Island. Cars cost enough, but only top echelon government, gang and corporate types could afford or even find fuel with any regularity. An administrative lawyer like Spencer Giamba only rode in the boss’s car.

There was a Blue Beret checkpoint at the western end of the Battery Loop tunnel. Normally limos were waved through. Not today. The Blue stood out in the middle of West Street just before the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel ramp.

“Guy must be good at vaulting hoods,” Collins noted as he swept the Criterion to the curb and stopped. He buzzed down his window on a toothy young cop with opaque aviator shades.

"Would you please step out and show me your i.d.?" the Blue asked pleasantly. "Your passenger, too."

Collins turned to Giamba, who nodded. So Collins got out and opened the rear door while the grinning cop stood back with a casual right hand on his nine millimeter automatic pistol. Two more Blue Berets sauntered around the car from the curb side. Collins, a head taller and a deal broader than the cop, opened his jacket and carefully produced a billfold wallet with his driver's license. Giamba followed his lead.

From behind he heard "Now?"

The toothy cop nodded and Giamba looked at Collins, who was impassive, and waited for the bullet. Instead he heard a slight creak and turned to see two blue posteriors disappearing into the shade of the limo.

"Hey!" cried Giamba. "Ya gotta show me some paper to make that legal."

"Be glad to," smiled the cop, "if you'll come back to headquarters to fill out some special order exclusion forms."

They all knew what that meant: piles of paper, official registry, a lookup tab in Afrodisio Ballard's file. Giamba clammed up, wishing Tidrow gout, the clap and fleas for losing the issuing stamp for Ballard's permit, which could conceivably get him out of this mess. So while Babe Collins crossed his massive, black-jacketed arms with disapproval at the tracking up and disarray being visited upon his ward, Giamba lit a black-wrapped cigarette and said:

"At least tell me what you're looking for."

The grinning cop scratched at the top of his blue beret, making his forehead wag.

"I don't know exactly. We were only told that it's small, it's the City's, and we'll know it when we find it."

Giamba turned away in disgust. A shakedown, pure and simple. If only—

Then, as though it had run a Stop sign, one thought hit another and created something violently new. Tidrow couldn't stamp the permit. Something, small and the City's, missing. If it was the permit stamp, the lid was off. Any jerk could make a stamp, but the tiny impregnator pins, the UV scan effects – much more difficult, but then, who had UV scanners and templates but the Blues? And when did you ever see a Blue in Brooklyn? No permit valid, all permits valid. Dangerous and wonderful possibilities swam in the smoke before Spencer Giamba's jasperine eyes, making his time pass pleasantly, better in fact than had the trip gone as planned.

For Babe Collins it was just another hassle that came with the job. This hassle, though, was messing with the car, which was his labor of love. The Boss had picked up the car with him at Brighton Coach Works two years ago and sat back in seventh heaven as Babe scorched the stretch out on the Belt, leaving the old Jag in the dust despite the greater size.

Still, Babe at the wheel had not been satisfied. He felt the minute flaws in compression, stealing eight fragments of precious torque to be translated across the massive horse-cock of a driveshaft to the differential. At night, in secret, in his white coveralls in The Boss's spotlessly white garage, he laid out his gleaming steel tools with the precision of a surgeon and performed his surgery. He removed the heads, injectors, cams and cylinders, bathing, drying and cherishing each precision-tooled piece, then calibrated and, with infinite care, rebored each sleeve until it was perfect, immaculately cleaned all eight combustion chambers, and reassembled the seven litre behemoth with reverence until, just before dawn, the last turn of the torque wrench done, he lit the ignition to the purr of a lion.

The Boss never noticed. He commented on the finish, the clean comfort of the seats, he refreshed himself at the bar and visibly relished the power. But only Babe Collins knew this Criterion was perfect.

And now these asshole Blues were tracking dust all over his baby.

More: There were certain pressure points in the dash and door panels that would each reveal a Mark 4 pocket blaster. It wasn't likely these boys would stumble onto them – it wasn't that kind of search – but it would be inconvenient if one of them poked just below the window switch on the door, say, and the bottom panel popped open to proffer a Mark 4, loaded and ready to fire.

The Blues crawled out of the Caddy wearing faces that said they expected to find nothing. The grinning cop handed back the i.d. to Collins and Giamba and bid them good-day. Giamba threw a parting shot.

"When you find what you're looking for, give Mr. Tidrow my regards!"

Then he zipped into the back and Collins closed the door. Collins dusted off the front seat and hunkered in, and they were off again, down and into the tunnel.

Collins used the tunnel's straight and narrow to scrutinize his passenger in the rearview mirror. Spencer Giamba had a tight, glittering smile that shone in the light or shadow of the passing tunnel lamps. Collins feared this look. Whenever this cheap shyster smiled and caught The Boss's ear, people died. A leech, thought Collins, a little general who needs The Boss's muscle.

Collins looked away from the light rising and falling on Giamba's face in the mirror, snapping back to the gleaming hood of the Criterion flashing by the tiled walls and fluorescent fixtures of the tunnel. The roadway seemed to bottom, then rise gently and sweep to the left.

His hands relaxed. The tunnel was safe. In the tunnel, you could only be attacked from the front or rear, hard to do by surprise; in a City-controlled area, neither was likely.

Once they emerged from the tunnel and passed the toll booths, though, a strike could come from anywhere, four sides, above or below, or any combination, until he crossed the Belt at Stillwell or Ocean Parkway to the safe haven of Coney.

Ahead the cozy tunnel gloom paled as the tunnel eased left and breached to daylight. Collins saw the gun placements out the corners of his eyes as he fed a ten-spot into the toll scanner. The gate rose. Collins flexed his hands and eased the throttle all the way down.

Crossing the Gowanus viaduct at 90 left little time for decision: Stay on the perimeter with the neutral Gowanus Expressway, with all its cracks and craters from random shelling between the Sunset Park and Red Hook crowds? Or straight down the throat of Brooklyn, the gully between battlements of the Prospect Expressway into the wide chaos of Ocean Parkway? The Boss had done some deals down both sides of the Parkway. Just have to get through the Prospect. It had been all right coming out....

Collins pushed the nose of the Caddy straight down the Prospect ramp at top speed.

Not a long stretch of road. Three lanes, three miles at the outside, the last half flattening out at the shoulders. If the Ravers or whoever now owned this stretch had a tribute stop it had to be soon.

It was.

Around the curve toward 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, channeled by thirty foot concrete walls, the road was littered with huge chunks of concrete for several yards along either outside lane. The open center lane ended at a large dump truck bearing more rubble and a machine gun emplacement,

with more guns to the left and right and, a sixth sense told Collins, pursuit cars coming up behind.

“Get down,” Collins told Giamba as the partition closed.

They were already in the lane, and the boys in the truck knew the Caddy wasn’t stopping. Three guns opened up on the bulletproof limo as Collins punched two buttons on the firing panel. The first extended high-low blockers from the front and rear bumpers. The second fired the rockets.

The truck blew just before the Caddy got there. Collins swerved left just enough to clear out the back edge of the obstacles and the twisted front fender of the truck. Something ground against the low blockers and the swerving left rear, setting his teeth on edge just as the upper right blocker crunched against the shell of the truck. The Caddy slowed, growling, but didn’t stop, and suddenly broke free. Two figures running from the smoke of the burning truck didn’t have a chance: one bounced obliquely off to the left while the other mashed dead center and was still there when the limo sped free of the smoke, head and arms flopped loosely from concaved gray fatigues over the top blocker, a stream of blood from the mouth drizzling against the windshield. Collins hit the wiper/washers and retracted the front blockers. Jammed. But the Raver warrior began to sag, leaving a white-eyed grimace to remember him by as he slipped beneath the raging car.

A glance in the side-view past the red and gray lump in the roadbed told Collins that the pursuit car had given up the chase. And ahead, the highway rose and the shoulders leveled to the vast prospect of Ocean Parkway.

Ocean Parkway, the great tree-girt boulevard lined with luxury apartment towers at either hand. Look again, more closely: the six-lane thoroughfare was bordered by wide park-like

pedestrian islands and a narrow service road on each side. The islands in the road were all straggled and wild now, the better to conceal wire and booby traps and shanties, uncountable cardboard, beaverboard, scrapwood, car-shell shanties governed by Los Olvidados without any respect to any local satrapy. Los Olvidados had made this ten mile slash across Brooklyn a demilitarized zone. Ocean Parkway was too wide to assault and secure against a rival or rivals across its desolate openness, and no one knew for sure how many Olvidados there were or how they would respond to a breach of this enormous squatter's camp, their greatest achievement.

Collins settled down to a steady cruise. Traffic was predictably light. He finally remembered to roll down the partition window, and regretted it immediately. Giamba had been sick all over the plush upholstery. Collins tossed a pack of wet towels and a plastic bag to the miserable lawyer.

"Better get busy, Mr. Giamba," he said, adding mentally to his catalogue of woe. "The Boss won't be happy as it is."

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Uneventful miles later the white Criterion rolled past Coney Island Hospital and through the opened steel gates of the Belt Parkway underpass into the fiefdom of Afrodisio Ballard. Black-fatigued sentries above and behind the gates waved in the battle-scarred Caddy; the captain of the post radioed ahead.

Collins reflected again what a stroke of good fortune it was to hold such an easily defensible territory, with limited access through the revetments of the Belt on one side and water all around the rest. He turned right on Neptune; Brighton, to the left, was getting restive, but nothing The Boss's Black Pajama League couldn't handle. If The Boss would just not rub the

little hoods' noses in it quite so much, everything would be copasetic. A left on Stillwell and then right on Surf, parallel to the Boardwalk, one block to the citadel in Astroland Park.

An amusement park, for cryin' out loud. This never failed to pop into Babe Collins's mind as he approached the warlord's throne, just as it had when he and his fleet limo had run Ballard through a gauntlet of Wild Breed bikers on his return from Sing Sing four years ago. The park was still operative, Cyclone, Whip, Wonder Wheel, the works. A security nightmare. But for Ballard it was his common touch, mingling with the screams and laughter and variegated neon in the good times, the Friday night date, copping a feel in the House of Horrors, the deep kiss, the first fuck under the Boardwalk. No shakedown artist he: Afro B gave something back. On Tuesdays, the ticket book came with a free fin of slam.

Collins parked in the white blockhouse garage just inside the gate and shut the motor. He was too sick at heart to take stock of the damage. It would keep at least till that snake Giamba explained himself to The Boss. Babe swiveled briskly out of the driver's seat, grasped the latch of the back door, and pulled it open. Giamba climbed out, meek as the puppy that shit on your carpet.

The atmosphere leaching through the doorway was puke sour, but miraculously the smell's author was unscathed. You had to admire this rat-faced shyster who seemed impervious to consequences of any kind; Collins fought a strong urge to clean away the blood on the blockers and hood with that asinine seersucker suit. After all, there was a report to be made, a report with nasty repercussions, after which Collins would have to tell The Boss they would be using the Jag for a while.

Eddie and Leroy were the Black Pajamas on the blockhouse watch. Collins passed them a pace behind Giamba, flashing a gun hand with upraised forefinger and thumb which he cocked as he went in.

If the outside of the blockhouse was concrete drab, the inside was Versailles writ pimp. Mirrors wall to wall. Red velvet drapes tied back with gold cord. Black marble floors that ate footsteps. Potted palms, cana, topiaries bobbed and corkscrewed toward skylights of reinforced Lucite. And suspended between arches of the fourteen foot ceiling like a giant medallion was the emblem of the Black Pajama League: three black figures silhouetted, in crane stance, in rising block, in double-side thrust, behind the letters B, P and L, all cast in gold.

The antechamber formed a long hall deep into the heart of the blockhouse, extending fifty feet or more to the vast conference room. No invading force would get that far. The mirrors were all two-way glass with a gunner's post in each darkened room. And if they were overcome, the floor would drop away and the flamethrowers would open up. Afrodisio Ballard had learned much about life in amusement parks.

To the right of the huge lucite conference table were the staff quarters: showers, locker room, bunk room, provisions and skirmish tunnels in case of siege. To the left was the hospitality suite, including a dining room, billiards room and screening room, and the private office of Afro B.

A last Praetorian Guard slouched at either side of a massive red door with gilded panels. Collins, a step behind and a head taller than Giamba, again did the gun sign with his hand, but these guys were stiffness from the Black Fist group and didn't bat an eye. The taller one merely reached across and flipped the latch open. The door's motor kicked on and swung it ponderously inward; it could close, if need be, lots faster. The tall Black Fist stood to attention with a poker

face matched by his short mate. Both waited for Giamba to scamper into the inner sanctum with Collins easily at his heels, then followed them in.

The tiger-skin fan chair behind the huge mahogany desk drew attention from the small, neat, mocha-skinned man who was draped in its palm. Ballard's dreamy look brushed them with a "Hm" as he nodded to the Black Fists, who retired. He waved a hand at Giamba and Collins, leaving a raised index finger. Giamba helped himself at the bar. Collins settled in a stuffed leather armchair at the back corner of the room, riffling through a coffee table edition on racing cars.

Ballard shifted, noiseless and liquid in an ivory silk lounge jacket, and settled with a satisfied "Ah." He smiled at his desk.

"That will be all for now, thank you."

An oriental frisker emerged as a jet black curtain of hair from beneath the desk, and trotted off for the beach.

"So, shyster, we in business?" he crooned, leaning forward on his elbows. His cuffs drooped to reveal angry black tags linked by scars.

"No," Giamba snapped after a belt of scotch. "Better."

Ballard's head lolled back against the chair, his close afro glistening with scented oil.

"Explain," he sighed.

"Tidrow's people lost the stamper," Giamba said. "Alluviasudden anyone can make or get a collections permit. So by the same token, no permit is legit."

"Anarchy," observed The Boss with his eyes closed.

Giamba nodded, warming to the subject.

"An opportunity," Ballard said with sudden clarity.

Giamba's eyes gleamed from clear across the room.

"A breakout, if you will. Spread it around that the Fratelli aren't really collecting for the City. While they're spread out to handle the backlash, hit 'em hard and grab Gravesend and Bensonhurst. The Rays in Bay Ridge have never been threatened with the Fratelli at their flank, so they'll deal. And then there are the Ravers."

"Aah," sighed Afro B, "the Ravers."

A long, almost delicate hand dropped to intersect with the mouthpiece of a hookah. Giambi leaped forward with a light. The thick odor of hashish and Turkish tobacco suffused the plush office. Afro B took a few meditative tokes, eyes glazing to middle distance, before he said:

"That's war, shyster. War for South Brooklyn." He sucked more smoke.

"South Brooklyn's there for the taking by anyone with the nerve and muscle," said Giamba, trying to follow the patterns of the thick Persian rug. "You've got both – and a few scores to settle." He threw Collins a significant look.

"What, Babe?" The Boss asked.

Collins blinked up from his car book and shrugged.

"The Ravers had a block on the Prospect. We ran it okay, but the car's taken a beating, inside and out."

The Boss nodded and drew deeply on the mouthpiece.

"Killing is easy. Hard thing's to stop." A leer slowly bowed Afro B's tight cheeks. "So I guess I ain't stoppin' now..."

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