

# DONALD E. WESTLAKE

BAD NEWS

A DORTMUNDER NOVEL



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FOR COMIC STRATEGY...A LUNATIC BRILLIANCE."

—Marilyn Stasio, New York Times Book Review

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Once Against the Law (coedited with William Tenn)

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# DONALD E. WESTLAKE

## BAD NEWS



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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I would like to dedicate this novel, with apologies, to all of the translators who've had to deal with my language in their languages over the years. I have not made it easy for them. For instance, they're going to have to deal with the "verisimilitude" remark in the first chapter of this current book. Therefore, one dedication and two aspirin to Laura Grimaldi, Jiro Kimura, Jean Esch, and all my other artful collaborators. Thank you.

# **BAD NEWS**



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John Dortmund was a man on whom the sun shone only when he needed darkness. Now, like an excessively starry sky, a thousand thousand fluorescent lights in great rows under the metal roof of this huge barnlike store building came flickering and buzzing and slurping on, throwing a great glare over all the goods below, and over Dortmund, too, and yet he *knew* this vast Speedshop discount store in this vast blacktop shopping mall in deepest New Jersey, very near Mordor, did not open at ten minutes past two in the morning. That's why he was here.

Speedshop was a great sprawling mass-production retailer stocked mostly with things that weren't worth more than a quarter and didn't cost more than four dollars, but it had a few pricier sections as well. There were a pharmacy and a liquor department and a video shop and an appliance showroom. Most important, from Dortmund's point of view, there was a camera department, carrying everything from your basic low-price PhD (Push here, Dummy) to advanced computer-driven machines that chose their own angles.

In two Speedshop tote bags, canvas, white, emblazoned in red with the Speedshop slogan:

! SAVE FAST !  
at  
!! SPEEDSHOP !!

Dortmund could fit ten thousand dollars' worth of such high-end cameras, for which he would receive, no questions asked (because the answers are already known), from a fellow in New York named Arnie Albright, one thousand dollars in cash. Ten minutes inside the store, no more, after he'd bypassed the loading dock alarm systems, and he'd be back in the Honda Platoon he'd borrowed forty minutes ago from an apartment complex farther up the highway, and well on his way home to the peace and quiet and safety of New York City.

But, no. As tote bags full of cameras dangled from his bony hands and he loped down the silent, semidark aisles—little night-lights here and there guided him along his way—he was suddenly bathed in this ice-water deluge of a harsh white fluorescent glare.

Okay. There must have been something, some motion sensor or extra alarm he hadn't noticed, that had informed on him, and this big store would be filling up right this second with many police officers, plus, probably, private Speedshop security people, all of them armed and all of them looking, though they didn't know it yet, for John Dortmund. Didn't know it yet, but soon would.

What to do? First, drop these bags of cameras behind a kids' sneaker display rack. Second, panic.

Well, what else? He'd come in from the loading docks at the back, which they surely knew, so *they* would come in from the back as well, but they would also come in from the front. And they would leave guards at every entrance, while the rest of them fanned out to search inexorably forward like volunteer Boy Scouts in pursuit of a lost hiker. Any second now, groups of them would appear at the ends of aisles, visible far away. And he would be just as visible to them.

Hide? Where? Nowhere. The shelves were packed full and high. If this were a traditional department store, he could at least try to pretend to be a mannequin in the men's clothing section, but

these discount places were too cheap to have full entire mannequins. They had mannequins that consisted of just enough body to drape the displayed clothing on. Pretending to be a headless and armless mannequin was just a little too far beyond Dortmund's histrionic capabilities.

He looked around, hoping at least to see something soft to bang his head against while panicking, and noticed he was just one aisle over from the little line of specialty shops, the pharmacy and the hair salon and the video rental and the optician.

The optician.

Could this possibly be a plan that had suddenly blossomed like a cold sore in Dortmund's brain? Probably not, but it would have to do.

As the individual all those legislators most specifically had in mind when they enacted their three-strikes-you're-out life-imprisonment laws, Dortmund felt that any plan, however loosely basted together, had to be better than simple surrender. His wallet tonight contained several dubious IDs, including somebody's credit card, so, for almost the first time in his life, he made use of a credit card in a discount store, swiping it down the line between door and jamb leading to the optician's office, forcing the striker back far enough so he could push open the glass door in the glass wall and enter.

It wasn't until after the door snicked shut again behind him that he realized there were no knobs or latches on its inside. This door could only be opened or closed or locked or unlocked from the outside, because the fire laws required it to be propped open anytime the place was open for business.

Trapped! he thought, but then he thought, wait a second. This just adds whadayacallit. Verisimilitude. Unless that's the color.

The optician's shop was broad and narrow, with the front glass wall facing the rest of Speedshop plus white walls at sides and back, liberally decorated with mirrors and with color photographs of handsome people with bad eyesight. A glass counter and display case full of spectacle frames faced the door, and little fitting tables with mirrors and chairs stood to both sides.

Against each side wall was a small settee where customers could sit and wait for their prescriptions to be filled, with magazines stacked on a nearby table. The light in here at this time of night was only the long, dim bulbs inside the display racks, mostly showing the frames on the glass shelves.

Dortmund dashed around the end of the counter and found the cash register, which for once he didn't want. But under it was the credit card swiper, which he did want. He found the blank receipts, swiped one with the credit card he'd used on the door, filled in the receipt with some stuff—\$139.98, that seemed like a good number—looked at the name on the credit card, and signed it more or less the way it looked on the back: Austin Humboldt.

Customer copy, customer copy; here it is. Glancing at the windows across the way—no cops out there yet—he pocketed the customer copy, found the stack of used receipts under the cash register, and added Austin Humboldt's near to but not at the top of the pile. Out of his wallet and into his shoe went all the IDs not named Humboldt. Then he started around the counter again.

Wait a minute. If he was buying glasses, he was somebody who'd wear glasses, right? A display on the rear wall was two-thirds full of glasses; he grabbed a pair at random, slapped them on, and realized he was looking through nothing. No glass, just frames.

Try it? No; up close, it would be obvious, and he had the feeling he'd be inspected up close very soon now.

Time, time, time—there was no *time* for all this. Down to his left, another display of glasses, and these bounced dim light at him from a hundred lenses. He lunged down there, praying they wouldn't be blind-as-a-bat prescription specs, threw on a pair of delicate but manly tortoiseshell frames, and looked through glass. Clear glass, clear. Okay!

Now he could run around the counter, collapse onto the nearest settee—it wasn't very comfortable—grab a three-month-old *People* from the little table, open it facedown on his lap, and flop, eyes closed.

It took them three minutes to find him. He slumped there, unmoving, telling himself to relax, telling himself, if worse came to worst, he could probably eventually escape from prison, and then he heard the rattling of the metal knob on the glass door.

Don't react, he told himself. Not yet, it's too soon. You need your sleep.

Banging and knocking on the glass door and the plate-glass wall. Indistinct, muffled shouting.

Dortmunder started, like a horse hearing a pistol shot, and stared around at the optician's shop, the magazine sliding off his lap, and at last at the glass wall, which had become an active mural of cops peering in at him, staring pressing faces to the glass, waving and yelling—a horrible sight.

And now he realized these glasses he'd put on were not *exactly* clear lenses, not *exactly*. They were some kind of magnifiers, reading glasses or whatever, which made everything just a little larger than usual, a little closer than usual. He not only had this horrible mural of Your Police In Action in front of him, he had them in his lap.

Too late to change. Just stagger forward and hope for the best. He jumped to his feet. He ran to the door, reaching for the nonexistent knob, bruising his knuckles against the chrome frame surrounding the glass, because it wasn't exactly where he saw it, then licked his knuckles. Cops crowded close out there, the other side of the glass, calling, intensely staring.

Dortmunder stopped licking his knuckle to show them his most baffled face. He spread his hand then pointed at the door, then made a knob-turning gesture, then shrugged like Atlas with an itch.

They didn't get it yet. They kept yelling at him to open up. They kept pointing at the door as though he didn't know where it was. He did his little repertoire of gestures some more, and then two of them, one at the door and one at the wall next to the door, pressed their faces to the glass, so that they now looked like fish in police uniforms, and squinted to try to see the inside of the door.

Now they got it. And now Dortmunder, once they understood he was locked in here—it's a locked-room mystery!—began to exhibit signs of panic. He'd been *feeling* panic all along; it was nice to be able to show it, even though under false colors.

He bobbed back and forth along the wall, waving frantically, gesturing with great urgency that they should release him. He pointed at his watch—do you people realize what *time* it is?—he mimed making rapid phone calls—I got responsibilities at *home*!—he tried to tear his hair, but it was too wispy to get a grip on.

Now that *he* was excited, the cops all became calm. They patted the air at him, they nodded, they made walkie-talkie calls, they came close to the glass to mouth, *Take it easy*. Easy for them to say.

It took them fifteen minutes to unlock the door; apparently, none of them was a good credit risk. While more and more of them, cops and rent-a-cops both, came streaming in from all the aisles of Speedshop to stare into this one-man zoo, Dortmunder kept ranting and raving in pantomime, flinging his arms about, stomping back and forth. He even ran around behind the counter and found the phone intending to call his faithful companion, May, sleeping peacefully at home in their nice little apartment on West Nineteenth Street—would he ever see it again?—just so the cops could see the frantic husband was calling his worried wife, but a recorded announcement told him he could make only local calls from that phone, which was even better. Let May sleep.

At last, another team of cops arrived, with special vinyl jackets in dark blue to show they were supercops and not just trash cops like all these other guys and gals, and they had several strange narrow metal tools with which they had at the door.

God, they were slow. Dortmunder was just looking around for a helpful brick when at last the

door did pop open and maybe twenty of them came crowding in.

“I gotta call my wife!” Dortmund yelled, but everybody else was yelling, too, so nobody could hear anybody. But then it turned out there actually was someone in authority, a gruff, potbellied older guy in a different kind of important uniform, like a blue army captain, who roared over everybody else, “That’s enough! Pipe down!”

They piped down, surprisingly enough, all of them except Dortmund, who, in the sudden silence, once again shouted, “I gotta call my wife!”

The man in charge stood in front of Dortmund as though he were imitating a slammed door. “Name,” he said.

Name. What was that name? “Austin Humboldt,” Dortmund said.

“You got identification?”

“Oh, sure.”

Dortmund pulled out his wallet, nervously dropped it on the floor—he didn’t have to pretend nervousness, not at all—picked it up, and handed it to the boss cop, saying, “Here it is, you look at it, I’m too jumpy, my fingers aren’t working.”

The cop didn’t like handling this wallet, but he took it, opened it up, and then spent a couple minutes looking at several documents the real Austin Humboldt would be reporting stolen six hours from now. Then, handing the wallet back, waiting while Dortmund dropped it again and picked it up again and returned it to his pocket, he said, “You broke into this building half an hour ago, came in here, got locked in. What were you after?”

Dortmund gaped at him. “What?”

“What were you after in this shop?” the cop demanded.

Dortmund stared around at all the displayed eyeglass frames. “My glasses!”

“You break into a store at—”

“I didn’t break in!”

The cop gave him a jaundiced look. “The loading dock just happened to be open?”

Dortmund shook his head, a man besieged by gnats. “What loading dock?”

“You came in through the loading dock—”

“I did not!”

Another look. “Okay,” the cop decided, “suppose *you* tell *me* what happened.”

Dortmund rubbed his brow. He scuffed his shoes on the industrial carpet. He stared at his feet. “I don’t *know* what happened,” he said. “I must of fell asleep.”

A different cop said, “Captain, he was asleep when we got here.” He pointed at the settee. “Over there.”

“That’s right,” said several other cops. “Right over there.” They all pointed at the settee. Outside the plate glass, some of the other cops pointed at the settee, too, without knowing why.

The captain didn’t like this at all. “Asleep? You broke in here to *sleep*?”

“Why do you keep saying,” Dortmund answered, drawing himself up with what was supposed to be an honest citizen’s dignity, “I *broke* in here?”

“Then what *did* you do?” the captain demanded.

“I came in to get my prescription reading glasses,” Dortmund told him. “I paid for them, with credit card, two pair, sunglasses and regular, and they told me to sit over there and wait. I must have fell asleep, but how come they didn’t tell me when my glasses were ready?” Looking around, as though suddenly realizing the enormity of it all, he cried, “They *left* me here! They walked out and locked me in and left me here! I could of starved!”

The captain, sounding disgusted, said, “No, you couldn’t of starved. They’re gonna open again in the morning, you can’t starve overnight.”

“I could get damn hungry,” Dortmund told him. “In fact, I *am* damn hungry, I never had my dinner.” Struck by another thought, he cried, “My wife is gonna *kill* me, I’m this late for dinner!”

The captain reared back to study his prisoner. “Let me get this straight,” he said. “You came in here earlier today—”

“Around four this afternoon. Yesterday afternoon.”

“You bought two pairs of glasses, you fell asleep, and you want me to believe the staff left without seeing you and locked you in. And it was just coincidence that somebody *else* broke into this building tonight.”

“Somebody broke in?”

Nobody answered; they all just kept looking at him, looming outside these glasses, so finally Dortmund said, “How often does that happen, somebody breaks in here?”

The captain didn’t deign to answer. Dortmund looked around, and another, younger cop said, “Not a lot.” But he sounded defensive.

“So it happens,” Dortmund said.

“Sometimes,” the younger cop admitted, while the captain glowered at this underling, not pleased.

Dortmund spread his hands. “So what kind of a coincidence is that?”

The captain leaned closer; now the glasses made him look like a tank with eyes. “How did you pay for these glasses? Cash?”

“Of course not.” Now the damn glasses slipped down his nose, and he finger-pushed them back, little too hard. Oow. Blinking, eyes watering, which didn’t help, “I used my credit card,” he said.

“So the receipt should still be here, shouldn’t it?”

“I dunno.”

“Let’s just see,” the captain said, and turned to one of his flunky cops to say, “Look for it. The credit card slip.”

“Yes, sir.”

Which took about a minute and a half. “Here it is!” said the cop, pulling it out of the stack he’d placed on the counter.

In stunned disbelief, the captain said, “There’s a credit card slip there?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dortmund, trying to be helpful, said, “I’ve got my copy in my pocket, if you want to see it.”

The captain studied Dortmund. “You mean, you really did come in here this afternoon and fall asleep?”

“Yes, sir,” Dortmund said.

The captain looked angry and bewildered. “It can’t be,” he insisted. “In that case, where’s the burglar? He has to be in the building.”

One of the rent-a-cops, an older guy with his own special uniform with stripes and epaulets and stars and awards and things on it to show he was an important rent-a-cop, a senior rent-a-cop, cleared his throat very loudly and said, “Uh, Captain.”

The captain lowered an eyebrow at him. “Yeah?”

“The word went out,” the senior rent-a-cop said, “that the burglar was caught.”

The captain got that message right away. “You’re telling me,” he said, “no one’s watching the exits.”

“Well, the word was,” the senior rent-a-cop said, “he was, you know, caught.”

Dortmund, honest but humble, said, “Captain, would you mind? My wife’s gonna be really, really, really irritated, I mean, she doesn’t like me to be *ten minutes* late for dinner, you know, and—

The captain, furious at everybody now, snapped, “What? What do you want?”

“Sir,” Dortmund said, “could you give me a note for my wife?”

~~“A note!” The captain looked ready to punch a whole lot of people, starting with Dortmund.~~

“Gedaddahere!”

“Well, okay,” Dortmund said.

May didn't like to be critical, but she just had the feeling sometimes that John didn't really *want* a nest egg, or a financial cushion, or freedom from money worries, or even next month's rent. She felt somehow that John needed that prod of urgency, that sense of desperation, that sick knowledge that he was once again dead flat, stony, beanless broke, to get him out of bed at night, to get him to go out there and bring home the bacon. And the pork chops, and the ham steak, and maybe the butcher's var as well.

Oh, he *made* money sometimes, though not often. But it never got a chance to burn a hole in his pocket, because it burned through his fingers first. He'd go with a couple of his cronies out to the track, where obviously the horses were smarter than he was, because *they* weren't betting on *him*, were they? John could still remember, as he sometimes told her, that one exciting day when he'd almost broke even; just the memory of it, years later, could bring a hint of color to his cheeks.

And then there were the friends he'd loan money to. If he had it, they could have it, and the kind of people they were, they'd take his two hundred dollars and go directly to jail.

So it was no surprise to May, this morning, that John's great triumph last night, over in New Jersey, was that he'd escaped. Not with the loot he'd gone over there for, of course; just with himself.

"Hundreds of them," he told her. "More uniforms than a convention of marching bands, and I walked right outta there. I almost got them to give me a note to tell you how come I missed dinner."

"But you missed the swag," she pointed out.

"Oh, the cameras," he said. They were having breakfast—black coffee and half a grapefruit for her, cornflakes and milk and sugar in a ratio of 1:1:1 for him—so there were pauses in the conversation while he chewed and she swallowed. After the next pause, he said, "See, the thing is, May, by then I was a guy buying eyeglasses. If I try to walk out with fourteen cameras, it doesn't go with the image."

"Of course not," she said. She didn't say that was the reason she held on to her cashier job at Safeway supermarket, a job she was going to have to leave here for in a few minutes, because what was the point? He'd only feel bad, and it was so rare that John felt good, she couldn't bring herself to spoil it. He'd gone out last night to raise some ready and he'd come back empty-handed, but the triumph was, he'd come back. Fine. She said, "Andy called last night."

Andy Kelp was a not unmixed blessing in their lives, reflected in the way John immediately lowered his head closer to his bowl, shoveled in a whole lot of cornflakes and milk and sugar, and on then said, "Nrrr?"

"He said he had a little project," she told him, "simple and easy."

"Ne-er," John said.

"Well, you never know, John, be fair."

"I know."

"He's coming over this morning," she said, "to tell you all about it."

"What time?" he asked, as though considering two escapes in twenty-four hours, and a third

voice said, "Morning. Hi, May, is there extra coffee?"

"I made enough, because you were coming over," May said, and Andy Kelp, a sharp-featured, bright-eyed fellow in a black windbreaker—because it was October outside—crossed over to the stove, where the coffeepot simmered. May told his moving form, "I just told John you called."

"Thanks, May."

John said, "Andy, you still don't use the doorbell."

"I've heard your doorbell, John," Andy told him, bringing his coffee over to join them at the kitchen table. "It's an awful sound, it's a nasty buzz. It's like one of those sounds they describe on *Cat Talk*, why would you want to start your day listening to a nasty noise like that?"

Complaining to May, John said, "He uses our apartment door to practice his housebreaking on. And the building door."

"You gotta keep those muscles exercised," Andy said.

May said, "I don't know, John, I don't mind it anymore, especially if he calls ahead, like today, so there won't be any, you know, embarrassment. It's almost like having a pet."

John looked Andy over, as though considering him as a pet: Keep him, or have him put to sleep?

After a minute, Andy decided to hide behind his coffee cup awhile, and then to clear his throat a lot, and then to say, "Did May tell you I had us a little job?"

"Breaking and entering?" John asked. "Like you do here?"

"Now, John," May said.

"No, nothing like that," Andy told him. "It's just a little digging. It's hardly even illegal."

"Digging?" John swallowed some of his own coffee, to have his mouth absolutely clear as he said, "You want me to dig ditches, is that what this is?"

"Well, it's kind of a ditch, I guess," Andy said, "but not exactly."

"What is it exactly?"

"A grave," Andy said.

"No," said May.

John said, "Grave robbing? Andy, I'm a robber, I'm not a grave robber."

"It's not grave *robbing*," Andy said, "it's more, you know, *switching*."

"Switching," John said, while May just sat there, saucer-eyed, looking at Andy Kelp, her grapefruit and her job at Safeway both forgotten. She didn't like graves, and she certainly didn't like the thought of people digging in graves.

Meanwhile, Andy explained a little more, saying, "See, what it is, out in that big cemetery out in Queens, one of them out there, there's this grave. Kind of an old grave, guy's been in there quite a while."

"I don't think I wanna hear about this," John said, and May nodded in silent agreement.

"We're not gonna *look* at him, John," Andy said.

"Well, *I'm* not."

"We don't open the box at all," Andy assured him. "We dig down to it, we pull it outta there, we put it in the van."

"We got a van."

"It's the employer's van."

"We got an employer."

"I'll get to that," Andy promised. "What we do, we go out there with this van, and there's already a coffin in it."

"I bet this coffin is full," John said.

"You got it," Andy told him. "Absolutely. This guy was already dug up out west someplace, and whatever they had to do to fix him up for whatever this is—"



“Whatever what is?” John asked.

“The scam, what’s going down.”

---

“And?” John asked. “What is this scam? What’s going down?”

“Well, I’m not in the loop on that,” Andy said. “We’re dealing with a real pro here, John, and he does this on a need-to-know basis, and that’s something we don’t need to know.”

“I don’t need to know any of it,” John told him.

But by now, May had gotten over her first shock and disgust, and she *did* want to know. She said, “Andy, what is this? You dig a coffin out of a grave and put another coffin down in there instead?”

“That’s it,” Andy agreed.

John said, “So, what is it? These guys look alike?”

“They do now,” Andy said.

May decided not to follow that thought. Instead, she said, “Andy, what are you and John supposed to do? Just do the digging and that’s it?”

“And the filling in again,” Andy told her. “And put the other coffin in the van, and I guess it goes back out west, or wherever.”

May said, “And nobody opens any of these coffins.”

Andy said, “Not while *I’m* around.”

John said, “Why us? Why me? Why you?”

Andy explained, “He needs people in our kinda business, you know, on the bent, that’ll keep the mouths shut and not ask any questions or show up to the party wearing a wire, and then maybe he’ll have another job somewhere down the line.”

May said, “Well, at least it would be healthful.”

John looked at her in disbelief. “Healthful? Hanging around a graveyard?”

“Out in the air,” she said. “Getting some exercise. You don’t get enough exercise.”

“I don’t want enough exercise,” he said.

Andy said, “He’ll pay us a gee apiece.”

Pleased, May said, “There you are, John! It’s your cameras!”

Alert, Andy said, “Cameras?”

“He had to leave them behind,” May explained.

“The point is,” John said, “I escaped.” Then, obviously preferring to change the subject, he said, “Who is this employer guy?”

“I met him on the Internet,” Andy said.

“*Oh* boy,” John said.

“No, come on, he’s okay,” Andy insisted. “As soon as he understood the situation, he stopped scamming me. That second.”

“Great.”

“And offered me the job.”

“And what’s this peach’s name?” John asked.

Andy said, “Fitzroy Guilderpost.”

Fitzroy Guilderpost said, “Do we have the shovels?”

“In the van,” Irwin said.

“Both shovels?”

“In the van,” Irwin said.

“And the Mace? The pistol? The duct tape?”

“In the van. In the van. In the van,” Irwin said. “And so’s the tarpaulin and the rope and the canvas strap.”

“In other words, what you’re saying,” Guilderpost summed up, “is that everything is in the van.”

“Except you,” Irwin said.

Little Feather said, “Shouldn’t you boys get moving?”

“Just dotting our eyes, Little Feather,” Guilderpost assured her. “Crossing our tees.”

“Before you start tilding your ens,” Little Feather told him, “maybe you oughta get moving.”

“I love these little glimpses of your education, Little Feather,” Guilderpost told her, and patted her leathery cheek, not too hard.

The three conspirators were gathered here, just before midnight, in a motel room on Long Island just over the border from New York City, not far from Kennedy Airport. They’d been here two days, in three consecutive but nonconnecting rooms, of which this was Guilderpost’s. It was still as neat as when he’d first entered it, or even neater, since he’d more perfectly aligned the phone and its pad on the bedside table. The only evidence of his occupancy, other than himself, was the slightly ajar ThinkPad on the round table beneath the swag lamp; the ThinkPad glowed quietly to itself down in there, thinking its own slow thoughts.

By contrast, Irwin’s room next door, within half an hour of their arrival, had begun to look like a men’s shop after the explosion, and Little Feather’s room, one beyond, while comparatively neat, was nevertheless, piled high with her possessions, her clothing, her cosmetics, her exercise tapes.

Guilderpost had interposed Irwin between himself and Little Feather deliberately. It was his rule never to mix business with pleasure, and that went double when dealing with as attractive a package of rat poison as Little Feather.

The three were more than an odd couple; they were an odd trio. Little Feather, the former showgirl, Native American Indian, was beautiful in a chiseled-granite sort of way, as though her mother were Pocahontas and her father Mount Rushmore. Irwin Gabel, the disgraced university professor, was tall and bony and mostly shoulder blades and Adam’s apple, with an aggrieved and sneering look that used to work wonders in the classroom but was less useful in the world at large.

As for Guilderpost, the mastermind looked mostly like a mastermind: portly, dignified, white hair in waves above a distinguished pale forehead. He went in for three-piece suits, and was often the only person in a given state wearing a vest. He’d given up his mustache some years ago, when it turned gray, because it made him look like a child molester, which he certainly was not; however, he did look like a man who used to have a mustache, with some indefinable nakedness between the

bottom of his fleshy nose and the top of his fleshy lip. He brushed this area from time to time with the side of his forefinger, exactly as though the mustache were still there.

Now he said, "No need to be overly hasty, Little Feather. The reason my operations invariably succeed is because I am an absolute stickler for detail."

"Hurray," Little Feather commented.

Irwin said, "What about the bozos? They gonna be as easy as the ones in Elko?"

"Easier," Guilderpost assured him. "I've only met the one, of course, but he's bringing a friend, and it isn't hard to imagine what a friend of Mr. Andy Kelly's will be."

"Another bozo," Irwin said.

"A couple of gonifs," Guilderpost agreed. "Strong backs and weak minds. They do the heavy lifting, and then we're done."

Little Feather cleared her throat and said, "*Tempus fugg-it.*"

Guilderpost smiled upon her. "Very well, Little Feather," he said, "you're undoubtedly right. Traffic into Manhattan can be uncertain, even at this hour. If Irwin is ready—"

"Been ready," Irwin said.

"Yes, fine," Guilderpost said. He would have preferred more subservient assistants, but where do you find them? Everybody's got attitude. And in fact, Little Feather's background was absolutely perfect for the part she was to play, and Irwin's scientific knowledge was invaluable. So one took the rough, as it were, with the smooth.

All three left Guilderpost's room, and he tested the knob to be certain the door was locked. The black Econoline van with dubious California plates waited in front of them. Irwin's Plymouth Voyager with the equally dubious South Carolina plates, in which he would follow the van, stood next over, in front of Irwin's room.

Little Feather nodded at them and said, "See you at breakfast."

Irwin said, "You don't want a report tonight?"

Guilderpost believed Irwin actually had designs on Little Feather, which just shows how recklessly advanced degrees are handed out these days.

Little Feather offered Irwin her version of a smile; a faint temporary crackling in the glaze. "There isn't any doubt, is there?"

"None," Guilderpost answered. "We'll place grandpa where he can be of help, use and deal with these final assistants as we have the others, and then we'll be off, at long last, to collect our reward."

"Goody," Little Feather said.

For the life of him, Dortmunder couldn't figure out how he'd been bamboozled into this. Standing on the southeast corner of Thirty-seventh and Lex at one in the morning, waiting to be driven out to a cemetery to dig a grave. And then undig it again. It wasn't right. It was menial, it was undignified, and it didn't fit his history, his pattern, his MO. "I'm overqualified for this," he complained.

Kelp, waiting cheerfully beside him as though ditch digging were the height of his ambition, said "John, it's the easiest grand we'll ever take in."

"It's manual labor," Dortmunder said.

"Yes, I know," Kelp agreed, "that's the downside. But look at it this way. It's also illegal."

"It's more manual than illegal," Dortmunder said, and a black Econoline van came to a stop in front of him. The driver's door was at the curbside, and out of it immediately popped a portly man in a dark gray three-piece suit, white shirt, narrow dark tie. He had completely tamed white wavy hair, like a lawn in Connecticut, and he looked to Dortmunder like an undertaker.

"Andy!" this fellow said, with the kind of rich voice that goes with that kind of rich hair, and stuck out a portly hand.

"Fitzroy," agreed Kelp, and they shook, and then Kelp said, "Fitzroy, this is John. John, Fitzroy. Harya."

"How do you do," said Fitzroy, with a gleaming but brisk smile, and when offered his hand, Dortmunder found it warm and pulpy, like a boneless chicken breast in a sock.

Kelp said, "Right on time."

"Of course," Fitzroy said, and to Dortmunder, he said, "I'm sorry, John, you'll have to ride in back."

"That's okay," Dortmunder said. At this point, what difference did it make?

Fitzroy led the way to the back of the van and opened one of the doors there. "Nothing to sit on but the floor, I'm afraid."

Naturally. "That's okay," Dortmunder said, and bent forward to climb in on all fours, feeling the rough carpeting beneath his palms.

"All set?" Fitzroy asked, but he didn't wait for an answer, instead slamming the door the instant Dortmunder's heels had cleared the area.

Dortmunder propped his left forearm on a wooden box taking up most of the space back here, so he could scrunch around and get into a seated position, legs folded in an extremely loose version of the lotus position. Then he looked around himself in the dimness.

There were no windows back here, only up front, the windshield and the windows in the doors flanking the front seats. In this space back here were two shovels, a coil of thick rope, some other stuff, and this long box he was leaning his forearm on, which was . . .

A coffin. Very dark brown wood, scuffed-looking, with pocked brass handles and a faint redolence about it like basements, like a greenhouse in winter, like freshly turned earth, like, well, like a grave.

Dortmunder took his forearm off the box and put it on his knee. Of course; this was the coffin that would go into the grave once they took the original inhabitant out. And I, Dortmunder thought, got to ride out to the cemetery with him. Great.

The other two got into the front of the van, and Fitzroy made the left onto Lex, then the left onto Thirty-sixth, and headed for the Midtown Tunnel. The darkened city bounced by, beyond those two heads.

It was May's fault, Dortmunder decided. So long as she'd been against him taking this job, it'd been easy to say no. But when she came to the conclusion there was something mystical or something about this being exactly a thousand dollars, the exact same amount as the profit he'd had to leave behind in the Speedshop, there was no hope for him. He wasn't a ditchdigger, he wasn't a grave robber, and he wasn't a guy given to manual labor, but none of that mattered. It was the thousand dollars coming around again, so he was supposed to grab it.

All right, so he'd do it and get it over with, and come back with the thousand, and never touch a shovel again for the rest of his life, so help him. In the meantime, Kelp and Fitzroy sat up front, jabbering about how useful the Internet was—sure, you could meet people like Fitzroy Guilderpost there, with shovels—while Dortmunder and the fellow beside him in the back had nothing to say to each other.

Dortmunder found, if he raised his knees and put his crossed forearms on them, and then rested his chin on his forearms, he could look out the windshield past those two happy heads and watch the city unreel. Also, in this position, he could watch their recent history in the large rearview mirrors beyond both side windows; large because there was no interior mirror, since there were no windows at the back of the van.

They were approaching the tunnel now. Traffic was light, mostly big panel trucks with 800 numbers on the back that you could call to rat on the driver if he wasn't doing a perfect job. Dortmunder wondered if anybody was ever fink enough to call one of those numbers. Then he wondered if anybody ever called one of those numbers to say the driver was doing a great job. Then he wondered at how bored he was already, and they weren't even out of Manhattan yet.

They ran through the tunnel, and Dortmunder noticed there was no one on duty at any of the glassed-in police posts along the way; a hardened criminal could actually change lanes in here. He looked in the rearview mirrors and saw a car appear, way back there. He noticed that the left headlight on that car was a little dimmer than the right. He realized he had to break out of this tedium right now if it wasn't healthy.

So he sat up straighter, ignored the rearview mirrors, and broke into the Internet conversation—they're doing E-mail in person up there—to say, "This box here come a long way?"

Fitzroy automatically looked at where the interior mirror would be, to see the passenger in back, then looked out at the tunnel again and said, "Out west."

"Oh, yeah? A long way. You don't have to, uh, refrigerate it or anything?"

"No, that's old in there," Fitzroy assured him. "That's almost seventy years old. Nothing more's going to change in there."

"I guess not. And the one we're switching? That's old, too?"

"Two or three years older, in fact," Fitzroy said. "You won't mind, John, if I don't tell you the entire operation."

"Not me," Dortmunder said. "I'm just making conversation."

But Fitzroy was full of his caper, whatever it was, and both wanted to talk about it and didn't want to talk about it. "It's the linchpin, I'll tell you that much," he said. Then they were out of the tunnel and at the tollbooths, and he said, "Excuse me."

"Sure," Dortmunder said. Polite guy, anyway.

It took Fitzroy, being portly, a while to get at his wallet, and then to hand over some bills to the attendant and wait for his change. Dortmund leaned his chin down to his knees again to look in the outside mirrors, and the car with the one fainter headlight was moving very slowly toward another open booth. Very slowly. That driver must be trying to get to his money before he reached the booth. The car was a gray Plymouth Voyager, a passenger van, the kind of suburban vehicle mostly used for hauling Little League teams around and about, though this one had only the driver, a guy, indistinct inside there.

Fitzroy at last got them moving again, and Dortmund sat up to say, "So this is the linchpin, huh?"

"We couldn't do the operation without it," Fitzroy assured him. "But with it, we win. We have to be absolutely secret about it, though, absolutely. We daren't risk a *word* getting out."

Kelp said, "Well, you know you can count on John and me. We'll never say a thing about this."

"Oh, I haven't the slightest doubt on that score," Fitzroy said, and turned his head to smile at Kelp. Seen in profile like that, from the back of the van, smiling, he looked more like a hungry wolf and less like a portly man.

It was only ten minutes along the Long Island Expressway, and then they were passing among the cemeteries, a huge necropolis spread across Queens, different cemeteries for different religions and ethnicities, clustered together for companionship, like campfires on the Great Plains. For the one they wanted, they had to stay on the highway to the far end, then take the exit there and circle back. Dortmund, who'd been getting bored again, once Fitzroy wouldn't talk about his scam anymore, had gone back to the chin-on-knee posture, and now he saw that same Plymouth Voyager with the gimpy headlight, well back there, but with his right turn signal on, preparing to take the same exit as them.

Is this guy following us? Dortmund wondered if he should mention it to Fitzroy, if this was maybe some problem with his secrecy that he should know about, but then he thought, Fitzroy's been looking in the same mirrors as me. I've seen him check those mirrors a lot, all the way out, so if he's that hipped on secrecy tonight, he's already noticed that car. So if it's somebody that *is* following us, Fitzroy already knows about it.

Dortmund thought about that.

Taking a side street that cut between two different cemeteries, Fitzroy said, "They lock these places at night for some reason, which could be a problem for us. We don't want anyone ever to know that anything happened here tonight. Fortunately, up ahead here, a portion of the fence is broken. Not done by us. Much earlier. Drug dealers possibly, or lovers."

"Or vampires," Kelp said.

"Yes, very good," Fitzroy told him. "But more likely ghouls, I think. Vampires prey on the living. It's ghouls that eat dead flesh."

"Well, so do we," Kelp said. "You know, beef and like that."

To distract himself from the conversation, Dortmund leaned down again to look in the mirrors. No lights but the wide-apart streetlights, so the Voyager had voyaged elsewhere. No, here it came, around the corner, well back. Came around the corner, and right away the headlights switched off.

Funny place to park.

Dortmund looked out front. They were on a bumpy blacktop street flanked by eight-foot-tall wrought-iron fences of two different designs, with tombstones visible beyond them both. The street ran straight up a gradual slope, and it looked to Dortmund as though the land tipped down again farther ahead.

But they didn't go that far. On the right, a section of fence sagged inward, away from one of the support bars, leaving an opening wide enough for a person to walk through, or maybe even two people abreast, but not wide enough for a car. Nevertheless, Fitzroy angled toward this opening, bumping up

over the curb and sidewalk—why had the city bothered to put sidewalks on a street like this?—and stopping just short of the fence.

“Now, Andy,” Fitzroy said, “if you and John get out and pull on that fence, you can open it wide enough for me to drive through. Once I’m in there, it would be best to close it up again.”

“Sure,” Kelp said, and opened his door.

Fitzroy said, “You’ll have to open the back door for John, there’s no knob on the inside there.”

The optician at Speedshop again. Dortmund wriggled about to face the back, trying not to lean on the coffin more than absolutely necessary, and Kelp came around to open the door. Dortmund clambered out and the two of them walked over to the fence, which was black wrought iron designed with daisy shapes between the vertical bars at waist level and again at head level. These shapes made good grips. As they grasped handfuls of daisies, Dortmund said, without moving his lips, “A car followed us.”

“I know,” Kelp said, without moving his lips.

The fence moved more easily than they’d expected. It was heavy, but once they got the end lifted from the ground, it swung without trouble.

There were a few old graves here, sunken, with tilting tombstones, but they weren’t in the way. Fitzroy steered slowly around them and stopped when he reached the gravel roadway.

Dortmund and Kelp moved the fence back to position number one, and Dortmund said, without moving his lips, “He likes absolute secrecy.”

“Absolutely,” Kelp said, without moving his lips.

They walked over to the van, where Fitzroy had opened his window so he could tell them, “It isn’t far, it’ll be just as easy to follow me.”

“Lead away,” Kelp said.

Fitzroy drove slowly along the gravel roadway, and Kelp and Dortmund walked behind, speaking without moving their lips. “They can try whatever they want,” Dortmund said, “just so he actually got that dough.”

“He’s got *some* dough,” Kelp said. “I took a look at his wallet at the tollbooth.”

“They won’t make their move until the switch is done,” Dortmund said, “so we still gotta do a little digging.”

“Maybe that’s good,” Kelp said. “Maybe their scam gets to be our scam.”

“I dunno about that,” Dortmund said. “I don’t like hanging out with dead bodies.”

“Well, they’re quiet,” Kelp said, “and you can trust them. We’ll see how it plays.”

The brake lights went on in front of them, and Fitzroy angled off onto the grass so that his headlights shone on a small pale stone in front of another slightly sunken grave. Dortmund and Kelp walked around the van, read the stone, which said:

JOSEPH REDCORN

July 12, 1907–

November 7, 1930

“Died young,” Kelp commented.

“There’s a lesson in that,” Dortmund said.

Fitzroy had gotten out of the van to go around back and open both its doors. Now he came toward them, carrying a folded canvas tarp, saying, “We want to be very careful we leave no traces of our digging. We’ll spread this on the next grave and put all the dirt there. Also, I’ll ask you to remove the

sod very carefully, so we'll be able to put it back."

~~Meaning somebody else would be coming along, probably pretty soon, to dig the guy up again.~~ And for Fitzroy's scam, the guy they dug up had to be the ringer from out west, instead of the actual Joseph Redcorn. Almost seventy years he'd been lying down there, old Joseph, minding his own business, and now he was getting evicted so somebody else could pull a fast one. Dortmund almost felt sorry for the guy.

Kelp said to Fitzroy, "I was saying to John, he died young, this fella."

"Well, he was an American Indian, from upstate," Fitzroy told him. "You know, those are the people that work in construction on the skyscrapers, up on the tall buildings. Mohawks, mostly, some others."

"This one was a Mohawk?"

"No, one of the minor tribes the Iroquois controlled, the Pottaknobbee. But Redcorn was a steelworker alongside them, on what they call 'the high iron.'"

Dortmunder said, "And something went wrong."

"He was working on the Empire State Building, while they were putting it up," Fitzroy explained "and one day in November, it started to rain. Help me spread this tarpaulin, will you, John?"

"Sure," Dortmund said.

They spread the tarp while Kelp got the shovels out of the van. Dortmund looked around, saw nobody, knew there was somebody nearby just the same, and took the shovel Kelp handed him.



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