

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE FEVER KILL AND NIGHTJACK

YOU'D BETTER WATCH OUT

TOM PICCIRILLI

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YOU BETTER WATCH OUT

By Tom Piccirilli



MACABRE INK

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YOU'D BETTER WATCH OUT

My father had always been shitstorm crazy violent, but they finally put him away for it thirteen years ago, after he'd swallowed my mother's tongue, when I was eleven.

You could ask anyone in the neighborhood the kind of man he was. They all hated him and wished him dead, but no one ever lifted a finger, a fist, or a 12-gauge against him. He was a dirty cop who skimmed on the mob's protection racket and kept the local shop owners hard under thumb. If anyone new to the area came to him for help he turned their name over to the wise guys. The next day we'd all gather in front of some store on fire and listen to the owner wail in the middle of the street as the flames ate his merchandise. Or his wife. Or his kids.

My father moonlighted as extra muscle for Johnny Iacobuzio, who we all knew as Johnny Booze. It was an open secret even in his Brooklyn precinct, the most corrupt one in the city. It was the station that perfected the "Brooklyn Bounce," a term applied because of the money and drugs that would disappear out of the evidence locker.

Lots of cops were on the take, but only my old man would strip off his blues and later go out with Booze's boys and heist a truckload of flat screen TV's or pack his throw-down weapon for some back alley drug deal. Even dirty cops put the blue before the long green and made sure the badge came first, but my old man never looked at it that way. Even the other cops hated him.

On Thanksgiving or Christmas or even Easter, Johnny Booze would load up his Mercedes SUV with top-shelf liquor, and hand it out all over town. To the church, the firehouse, the police station, even the old folks home. Johnny Booze knew if you wanted to win over the people all you had to do was keep them loaded.

My father used to abuse my mother and me regularly. It was so commonplace that I don't think any of us put much into it anymore. My mother and I suffered in silence, and my old man would fume and glare and lash out at us the same way, silently. We lived in a house of private quiet pain. I would hear my mother grunt in their bedroom and never know if he was slapping her or fucking her. In the morning she always looked equally bruised.

She never tried to lighten my load. She never made promises that we would one day escape the brutality of my father. She never told me that I would one day make it out of the neighborhood and do something with my life. It wasn't her fault. The possibilities of life had been torn out of her kick by my father's kick. While I sat at the kitchen table and did homework she would sew the buttons back onto his shirts that had been ripped loose by his whores. I would catch her jabbing the needle into her thumb and the two of us would watch her blood well. She never cried and neither did I.

Once, Johnny Booze's bagman stopped by the house to drop off my father's weekly cut and took my mother by the hand to the bedroom. I don't know if what he did to her could be considered rape since she never fought or cried or showed any resistance. I listened to him grunting and calling her a fucking bitch with every thrust. I wondered who he hated so much. If it was his wife or his mother or some puppy love who'd broken his heart when he was a youth. "You fucking bitch! You fucking bitch!" I suspected my mother found some kind of solace in his emotion-laden malice. I stood in the hall and glimpsed his face in the bedroom mirror. It was red with fury and he was sweating wildly. His throat was covered with twisting black, bulging veins. She held his face in her hands and stared into his eyes.

I thought I understood why such obvious viciousness would appeal to her. It was open. It was honest. It was human. Unlike my father's hate.

When the bagman left the house he handed me a hundred dollar bill and said, "Buy your mother something nice with this."

I tried. I walked in and out of the neighborhood stores wondering what she would like. Nothing made any impression on me because my mother hardly made one. Clothing, makeup, shoes, jewelry

food—none of it mattered to her. I walked into a toy store and looked around at the games and gadgets and didn't care enough about any of it to even spend the money on myself. I remember standing outside on the curb in the breeze and letting my hand drift open as I watched the C-note dive toward the asphalt and suddenly swoop upwards and out into traffic. It fell onto the other side of the street and kicked around in the gutter. I didn't bother to watch where it went.

Every week for the next couple of months the bagman showed up early with my father's money and took my mother in the bedroom and screwed her. I listened to him call her a fucking bitch.

Eventually my old man finally crossed the last line. It was Christmas morning and my mother had gotten up at dawn and spent the hours fixing a ham, baking cookies, and making last-minute arrangements to the decorations and the wrapping of presents. Despite her lack of will and brooding eyes there was always something about the holidays that managed to stir her from her cocoon of intensely black depression. The bagman came over and tried to fuck her but apparently couldn't get up. I heard him cursing louder than usual.

"It's your fault," he said. "You did something to me."

"I'm sorry," she whimpered.

"Sorry? You're sorry? You bitch. You rotten bitch."

The bagman must've worked muscle for Johnny Booze as well because he knew how to inflict pain without leaving marks. Not that it would've mattered much. My mother was already scarred and bruised and battered. But the bagman spent some time on her and I listened at the doorway as she coughed and groaned and squealed, but never very loudly.

I waited for her to call my name. I held on to a knife she'd left out to cut the ham. It wasn't particularly big blade and didn't have to be. I thought, All she has to do is show some resistance. All she has to do is speak my name. All she has to do is plead with him, beg him to stop, scratch his face, and I'd drive the knife in under his ear. People were always talking about the best way to incapacitate and kill a man. My father expounded with his drunken friends at length. He acted out scenes in the living room showing the correct way to press a pistol barrel against someone's temple to avoid blowback. How to stab someone so they'd die immediately, or take hours crawling through their own filth.

But my mother said nothing, didn't defend herself at all, accepted his fists and fingers, his slaps and pinches.

When he was finished I put the knife back and stood by the Christmas tree. I stared at the angel and thought of blood. When the bagman left he handed me two C-notes and said, "Merry Christmas kid. Make sure you buy your mother something nice. And get yourself a little something too, right?"

"Right," I said.

This time I unscrewed the plate to an electrical outlet in my bedroom and stuffed the bills inside the little niche. One of these days, I knew, I would have to get the hell out of here.

Late afternoon my old man walked in from a night of whoring, smelling of sweat, sex, blood, and perfume. He wasn't drunk like usual. He seemed edgy as hell. I got the feeling that someone had told him the bagman had been in the house a long time. I thought maybe Johnny Booze had done it just to get rid of my father. He'd been growing more and more violent and unstable in recent months. The other cops had started turning their backs on him. I overheard his phone calls and knew my old man had been slipping.

He walked to my mother. He said, "Have you been fucking some other man?"

My mother said, "Yes."

She folded the knife and fork and held her chin up as she stared into his eyes. She had absolutely no fear. A charge burned through the air. We could all feel it. We all knew what was about to happen. My father shut his eyes and screwed up his face and hung his head. He raised his massive fists up as if

damn God. It was a Biblical moment in its own way. The house seemed dry as a desert, with the dust of a thousand generations settling on our neglected, cheap furniture.

Even then I wondered why he acted the way he did at that moment. Why he may have cared so much or pretended to care so much. It all seemed like such a sham.

He glowered at me. "Did you know?"

I said, "Yes."

My mother glanced in my direction and smiled. It was such an unfamiliar sight that it was the first time in years that I felt genuine terror.

My old man looked into my eyes and understood that I knew what had been happening all along. He took one step in my direction and my mother took him into her arms. She hugged him tightly and tried to quiet his fury by shushing him and patting his back. She twined herself about him and he took her in his arms and pressed his mouth over hers and gave her the most passionate and loving kiss that I've ever seen.

Then he gripped her by her ears and pulled her even closer, his mouth starting to chew, her eyes going wide as the scream erupted in her chest but had no way out. He continued to seal his lips over hers even as he bit off her tongue and forced her to choke on it. Her blood had nowhere to go so she gagged on it and snorted it out her nostrils.

Finally my father let her go, his mouth still working as he swallowed. My mother fell to her knees with the black pulsing blood flowing down her chest. She smiled with red teeth and said a word that might've been my name.

She flopped over onto her back and rolled almost under the Christmas tree as she started to go into shock. I'd been rooted to the floor by the weight of foreknowledge. Everything that had just happened seemed to have been fated to happen as it did, with me a nearly active part in my mother's butchering.

Then the spell was broken and I ran to her and did my best to help her however I could. There wasn't anything to do. A strange noise fluttered from her throat. It could have been laughter. I tried to stick my hand in her mouth to put pressure on the wound but she kept turning her head away from me as her body trembled and her eyelids quivered. It didn't take long for her to die.

I think I was sobbing. My face felt wet and my vision was unfocused as if I was looking at things through a wet lens. I stared at my old man as all the strength went out of him at once. He got himself a bottle of beer from the fridge and washed his mouth out of the taste of my mother's tongue and spit the beer on the floor. He fell heavily into the kitchen chair in front of the ham and he took up the utensils my mother had left there. He slowly cut himself a hunk of meat off and ate it hungrily and greedily, and noisily. But not so loudly as to drown out the pathetic noises of my mother's death.

I used the phone in the bedroom to call 911.

I drew the back of my hand against my eyes and the tears were gone. I was very calm. I explained exactly what had happened and gave our address. My voice wasn't a voice I recognized. A strange and eerie cold descended on me.

I knew with a deranged kind of clarity that he hadn't wanted to kill my mother. I knew that he actually wanted to kill me instead. I couldn't completely put together his reasons, but his rage was an insane thing and I'd never really comprehend it. My mother had saved my life by moving into my old man's path.

I sat on the bed while my father ate our Christmas day ham in the kitchen. When he'd finished I heard him light a cigarette as whirling red light and sirens filled the windows and the rest of the world.

~*~

The fucker almost skated on an insanity plea.

He had a lot of juice with the system. Despite all the forensic evidence he never cracked and confessed. The DA couldn't make much of it stick. There was only one eyewitness. Me. I took the

stand against my father and swore on the Bible that he'd murdered my mother. My old man stared me from the defense table and tried to drive a psychic knife of hate into my heart. When I'd finished my testimony I got off the stand and walked back to my seat. As I passed his table my old man hissed "I'll be out in ten. I'll see you then."

I was eleven. My voice hadn't dropped yet. I didn't have a whisker on my chin. I hadn't kissed a girl. I hadn't learned to tug my pricklet. I'd watched my mother die crawling in her own filth, trying to say my name with the nub of her torn-off tongue. Black blood had pulsed from her mouth and she kept spitting.

But I was my old man's son. I had the same hate inside me. I contained a similar rage. I was already growing jaded and could feel myself caring less about everyone and everything around me. My old man already had the talk down.

I grinned. It was his grin. I said, "Don't be in a rush. The day you come home is the day you die."

The papers loved it. So did the defense team. I didn't react the way a normal eleven year old kid would. They said I was lying. You could tell just by looking in my face. Where were the tears? Where was my little boy charm? The ladies in the jury didn't want to wrap me up in a bundle and take me home. They were scared of me. My father earned points off me, but it wasn't enough. They led him out in chains and a clock started ticking down in my head.

I was packed into the system but Johnny Booze worked it out that my foster family would be Tony and Theresa Mara. Tony made small book for Johnny Booze out the back of his candy store. There was a holy roller in the Catholic church who went to Mass three times a week. They had a teenage boy of their own, Jojo, and a daughter a year younger than me, Angelina.

Jojo was a psycho in training. He was known around the neighborhood for bullying school kids and teachers and extorting cash and favors. He'd started off killing cats with his pocketknife and had worked his way up to slashing anyone who stood up to him. He liked the forehead. It was a good move, I knew. You bleed a hell of a lot and the blood runs into your eyes. Minimal damage for maximum effect.

I knew psychos. I knew manipulation. And I knew when I was being tested. Johnny Booze had put me in this house to show him what I could do. I wondered how long it would take.

Jojo acted friendly, almost brotherly, for the first couple of months. It was long enough for me to get a sense of his moods, when he might jump and when he might sit back and enjoy himself. He did a lot of pills, weed, and occasionally meth. When he was cranked he was at his best behavior. The meth mellowed him. The weed made him paranoid and pale. His parents never tried to rein him in. They were weak people, without bitterness or kindness. They were shadows who moved through their own home hardly speaking, just waiting for the day to die.

By then I was already in love with Angelina.

But every boy was. She was lovely in the way that everyone could instantly recognize. Intense long black hair, Mediterranean dark skin, eyes that were warm with kindness and innocence but blazing with a sharp intellect. She spoke little but had a strong presence that immediately made me understand she was always aware of me, always there for me. We held hands when no one was looking. I averaged a stolen kiss a month, at first.

It wasn't a crush for me and it wasn't budding adolescent hormones. I knew then that I'd one day marry her.

She had little say about her family. She dealt with them only as much as she had to and kept apart from the rest of the time. She was a loner by nature, the same as me, and that drew us to one another. We spent most of our time together, sharing space quietly. Reading, doing homework, watching movies, walking to and from school. I liked to watch the side of her face as we strolled through the neighborhood. The curve of her jaw, the soft blonde hair beneath her ear, the way her dimples came

and went depending on her expression.

Older boys were already hitting on her. I wasn't a threat so they ignored me. If anyone got grabby she'd give them hell. She was tough and had a mouth on her when she needed it.

Jojo made his move on me on a biting cold March afternoon. I was surprised it had taken him so long. I'd been watching him closely and knew he'd started breaking into pharmacies to steal prescription pills. He popped anything he could find without checking the labels. He'd moved up to stealing cars and sexually assaulting pubescent girls. He'd taken to giggling almost nonstop.

I was with Angelina at the corner ice cream shop. We were sitting together in a booth at the back. She'd bought an egg cream and here were two straws in it but I wasn't drinking. I was staring out the plate-glass window watching Jojo drive up and down the block in a stolen '72 Mustang that was more rust than anything else. The engine coughed on only four valves. He chirped the tires every time he came around the corner. I wondered if Angelina had any idea of what her own brother planned to do to her.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Is that Jojo showing off?"

"Yes."

"Don't let it bother you. Drink some of this with me."

"I'm not bothered."

"I won't let him hurt you."

I stole a kiss from her, a peck on the lips that made Mr. Grisiola, the store owner, raise his eyebrows at me. He was a good man, someone who used to pay my father but never showed any anger towards me for it. He smiled as Angelina took hold of my hand but his gaze hardened and focused on the street as Jojo pulled up and parked out front.

Jojo stepped in and cackled when he saw me with Angelina. He slid in beside his sister and sipped from her straw. He couldn't sit still. His face was thin and ashen, and he looked like he hadn't slept for three days. Angelina said, "You need to stop whatever you're doing."

"What I'm doing is making money."

"You don't look well and you smell like shit."

"You shouldn't talk like that. Especially to me." He said it with that giggle playing in the back of his throat but his eyes were black and practically swirling.

He glanced my way and said, "I want you to take a ride with me."

I said, "Sure."

Angelina reached out and gripped my wrist. "He's not going anywhere. We're having a nice afternoon together and I don't want you to ruin it, Jojo."

"I'm only here to help," he said. "Help him pick up a little extra cash so he can pay for more data like this, Angie. Wouldn't that be nice for the two of you?"

I had just turned twelve. I was beginning to notice changes within me. I had grown a few inches and put on some weight. There was a little peach fuzz coming in on my chin and upper lip.

"It would," I said. "Let's go."

Jojo let out another wild laugh. I got to my feet and he clapped me on the back and ushered me from the shop. Mr. Grisiola stared after me like he would never see me again.

I got into the passenger side of the Mustang and Jojo jumped behind the wheel and peeled out. I knew that it would take him a little while to get around to whatever he had in mind. He was too high. He was still in a good mood. He drove around Brooklyn for a while and then skirted into Queens. He wagged the wheel and bounced the Mustang off a couple of parked cars. I reached for the seat belt but there wasn't one. I held on tightly to the door handle and propped my feet against the sides of the

wheel well. Jojo was starting to come down a little. He lit a joint and I knew we were almost there.

~~He drove out east, talking anxiously the whole time. We took the Cross Island and headed to the north shore, where Jojo said he had a job for us. Some kind of a burglary. He drummed it up pretty good, saying it was a million-dollar mansion. He claimed I was the only one small enough to climb through a window. He hadn't even bothered to come up with a reliable, logical story. I was nearly as big as he was. That's what the real trouble was. He'd noticed I was finally becoming a real rival.~~

He drove up to 25A and continued east, where we watched the beautiful areas of Nassau County draping back towards the Long Island Sound. He lit another joint and the sweet smell of marijuana filled the car. He kept offering me a toke and I kept waving him off.

As he maneuvered into the richer neighborhoods where the houses grew more separated against the steep hills, he began to twitch. Part of it was with the eagerness to stick his blade into me. Part of it was because he was thinking of Angelina and all the things he'd be able to do with me out of the way. He trembled like a cello string. His eyes practically rolled with hatred.

He'd grown quiet. Every now and again he'd open his mouth and there'd be a distinct pop as his wet lips separated, but he still wouldn't say anything.

It was dark enough now that he could practically pick out any empty house and claim that was the one we were boosting. He couldn't seem to settle on anything because he was enjoying being on the edge so much. We were starting to go around in circles. I wondered what Johnny Booze would think of this setup if only he was here to witness it.

He had his knife in his jacket pocket and kept floating his hand over it like he was hoping the blade would leap into his fist.

I eventually knew I would have to prompt him. I pointed to a dark home and said, "Is that the one?" "Right. Good eyes. That's it," Jojo said.

He pulled over and threw the car into park, which is what I'd been waiting for. I opened the door like I was going to climb out. The dome light came on. I had to move fast. The street was dead, but you never knew who might look out a window or drive by. His reflection moved in the windshield, leering. That giggle broke from deep in his chest, such a quiet reminder of his madness. Jojo went for the blade. His mouth churned and I knew the name that was on it. He started to say it. "Ang—"

I dove back in, reached over, yanked the car keys from the steering column, and drove them into his left eye.

Jojo sucked air to shriek and I pinned him down in the driver's seat, my hand over his mouth. Whatever weight I had was muscle. I lay across him, pushing down and holding him in place. He continued screaming under my hand, his mouth inflating, the force of his muffled agony blown out against my palm. He'd gotten the knife out but the pain made him release it. He scratched at the door handle, trying to get it open. With his other hand he was trying to pull the key out of his eye, which hadn't exploded or run like jelly the way I'd been expecting. It looked like a boiled egg with a car key sticking out of it.

I jammed my right forearm across his chin and turned his face away from me. The motion tore the key out of his eye and now there was blood and fluid and gelatin running down his face. He kept clutching for the door handle and finally got a grip on it. He looked at me in terror with his one good eye and I wondered exactly what it was that he saw. Did he understand that he'd never had a chance? Would he ever know that compared to the insanity of my father Jojo's small madness barely registered? Nothing so far had even made my pulse speed up.

I grabbed the knife, snapped it open, and plunged the switchblade in under his left ear.

Jojo died almost instantly. A thick wad of black blood shot against the driver's-side window and that was all. He convulsed for a moment, rocking against the leather seats, and then sighed into my face and went limp.

I climbed out the passenger side, slammed the door, went around to the driver's seat and shoved him over. I got behind the wheel, grabbed the keys and wiped them clean on his shirt. I stuck the key in and started the car. I'd never driven before. I was still five years away from getting a permit.

I threw the Mustang into drive and got a feel for the brakes and the gas. We jerked and stuttered up the block and I'd gone about a mile before I realized I didn't have the headlights on. I snapped them on and practiced more around the neighborhood. I wasn't completely sure I knew my way back home to Brooklyn.

I knew we were close to the Sound. The first step was getting rid of Jojo's body. It didn't need to be hidden forever. Jojo had sealed his own doom by being a complete prick. No one was going to care that he was dead.

I kept driving back roads heading in what I hoped was a northern direction. I was gaining a little more confidence but barely went above 30 mph. Some cars came up behind me and honked as I passed. I was figuring things out.

Jojo had shit himself and the smell was getting bad. I rolled down the window and had to hang my head outside and take deep breaths. Beneath his awful stench I thought I could smell water. I turned the next corner and saw a little sandy road. I followed it and came to the shore of the Sound.

It was a small empty beach and I decided that was good enough. The tide would rise in the morning and either take Jojo's corpse out or not. I didn't care much. I found a chamois cloth and a couple of rags in the trunk and used them to clean out the car. When I was done I tossed them on the sand.

I stared across the water at the lights of Connecticut and the world seemed wide with possibility. It was full of a strange sort of grace. I felt exempt from my own worst actions. What I'd done was in the name of self-defense but that wasn't why I felt absolved.

After an hour I was driving comfortably at 60 mph along the Long Island Expressway to the Cross Island to the Belt. It was two in the morning when I pulled up and parked in Jojo's spot. No one had taken it. No one would have dared.

There, I thought, I've done it. I've crossed the line that will take me one step closer to murdering my father.

~ * ~

Three days later Jojo's body washed back up. By then Mr. Grisiola had told the neighborhood that I'd been the last one seen with him alive. Everyone knew what I'd done even if they had trouble believing it. Most of them were probably grateful. A few gave me the evil eye. Angelina seemed conflicted but never said anything to me. Her parents seemed a little relieved and there was actually some lively conversation around the dinner table for once. The cops came around and asked questions but everyone knew better than to talk out of turn.

Forensics went through the Mustang and found trace evidence but nothing to tie me or anyone else directly to Jojo's murder. They impounded the car. I waited for Johnny Booze to put the touch to me but he didn't. That was fine. I knew he would eventually.

It took four years.

When I was sixteen Johnny's SUV Benz pulled up alongside of me one afternoon while I was walking home from school. I turned and waited and stared at my reflection in the tinted windows until the back one slid down a few inches and Johnny told me to go around the other side and get in.

I climbed in back and sat across from Johnny Booze while he swirled a glass full of Glenlivet on the ice. He was a flash dresser and kept his cuffs shot like he was bringing the Rat Pack look back. He was a handsome man who wasn't aging very gracefully. I could smell the exfoliants, vegetable facial creams, and fruity shampoo beneath his cologne. He gave me a smile that showed a lot of teeth and a lot of humor. The Benz took off down the street.

Johnny sipped his drink, looked me up and down, and said, "You've got your old man's eyes."

I nodded.

“You ever visit him?”

“No.”

“How about your mother’s grave?”

“No.”

“She was a good woman.”

I said nothing.

He kept his gaze focused on my face like he was expecting to be able to read something in my expression. I wondered what he was after and how I could give it to him so we could move along.

“That thing with Jojo, you handled it well.”

I said nothing.

“And you were only a kid. And you never got a taste for it. Some guys, they do something like that they can’t ever stop.”

I said nothing.

A little gleam bled out of the corner of his eye. He cocked his head, hit me with the knowing grin. “You don’t have a taste for it, do you?”

“No.”

“You making it with that little Angelina Mara?”

“None of your business, Johnny.”

It got him chuckling. Then he quit and gave me a hard look, drank some whiskey, shook his head and let out another chuckle. “That’s good. You don’t answer questions like that, not even if I’m the one asking. Talking about private affairs like that is disrespectful to your girl.”

I said nothing and did nothing. I thought back to Johnny Booze putting me in that house with Jojo on purpose, just to see what I’d do. He’d been waiting for this moment as much as I’d been.

“You work after school at the soda shop? Grisiola’s place?”

“You know I do.”

“Well you’re not any more. It’s time to make some real money. Come by the Fifth Amendment tomorrow, four o’clock, right?”

“Okay.”

That’s how it went down. He didn’t ask if I wanted a job, just told me to show up the next day at his bar.

I ran errands, mopped the floors, served a little beer, and helped with the after-hours poker game. Wise guys from other mob crews would come down and join in. There was always an air of heavy tension. Nobody completely trusted anybody else, not even the capos and their own men. Bad blood between the syndicates of different cities went back ten, twenty, fifty years. Johnny kept things happy with good food, liquor, and hookers. He thought he was getting me laid for the first time by telling me to go upstairs with a chubby whore with an overbite and fake DD’s.

Angelina and I had been making love pretty steadily for about a year at that point. Her parents must’ve known but, as with everything else, they stayed the course of active non-interest. They were planning to retire to Florida as soon as they hit senior citizen status. I was glad that they had an exit strategy and hoped they’d eventually learn to enjoy life. I didn’t see it happening, but I thought anything was possible.

A couple of months later Johnny formally introduced me to the bagman who had raped my mother. His name, I knew, was Vincent Ventimiglia. Vinny Venti had moved up in Johnny Booze’s organization after my father went away. He became a soldier, hard muscle, a low-level hitter. He was one of those wise guys who’d been in the life for so long that he felt inured, safe, protected. I remembered him in bed with my mother.

He recognized my name but not my face. It had been five years since I'd seen him on the Christmas day when he'd beaten my mother shortly before my old man had murdered her. I was six foot and went two hundred of thickening muscle. I had taken on some of his gestures and personality traits as well. I didn't smile. I tended to squint. My hands were usually fists held down at my sides or in my pockets. My gaze constantly shifted. I kept an eye on everyone. I didn't say much.

Johnny said to me, "We want you to make some runs with us. Think you can do that?" I'd been waiting for Johnny to move me up into a key position. He hadn't stuck me in that house with Jojo just to watch me serve beer. He had an eye for talent and recognized that I could be a benefit to him.

"Sure," I said.

"You ride with Vinny. He'll teach you the ropes. You do what he says. He's the boss. He tells you to break someone's thumb, you break it. He tells you to fuck a nun, that nun gets fucked. Understood?"

Like my father I also tended to pause for a moment before answering a question. "Yes."

"Be ready. You'll get a call this week."

The call came the next day. Vinny said he would pick me up later that night. He told me to "be ready for anything." I still had the two C-notes he'd given me the Christmas morning he'd fucked my mother. I kept them folded up in my wallet. It wasn't just emergency money. I liked to run my thumb and forefinger over the cash and remind myself just how cheap life and dignity actually were.

I was out on the front step when Vinny drove up. Angelina was just inside the screen door. I'd told her exactly what was happening and she said, "Be careful." I told her I would be and walked down to Vinny's car. He eyed me for a while, grinning. I didn't grin back. He threw it into drive and we rushed through the streets heading out of Brooklyn towards Long Island.

He didn't explain much, not that I expected it. He said we were going to pay someone a visit. He didn't mention a name. He tried to imply that we were only going to rough the guy up, but Vinny's voice had taken on an edge that I knew could only mean murder. I knew the sound of it well.

"You didn't bring a gun, did you?" he asked.

"No."

"Good. Don't ever bring your own gun along. If we need one, I'll give you one."

"I don't have a gun," I told him.

So our first run was a hit. It was chancy of Johnny to send me out to ice someone so soon but he'd gotten where he was by winning people over. I thought he was trying to win me over right now by offering up Vinny as a kind of sacrifice.

As Vinny Venti drove I casually glanced over at him, staring at the side of his face. His throat was still covered with thick veins. I remembered him grunting as he fucked my mother and calling her a fucking bitch with every thrust. I still wondered who he had hated so much. He caught me looking at him and said, "What?"

"Who's the mark?" I asked.

"You don't ask questions. I tell you what you need to know when you need to know it, right?"

"Right."

Since he'd made his point, and I'd acquiesced, Vinny went on to explain to me what we were doing.

The mark's name was Stan Tripp. He was one of Johnny's cohorts who'd done good business for years. Stan ran real estate scams, fraudulent claims of beautiful lots in Florida, cheap condos on the Keys. He bilked a lot of senior citizens out of their golden years fund, and when the feds finally came down on him he turned rat in about five minutes. He'd been wearing a wire for about a month. Everyone apparently knew it. They'd been feeding him some false information to divert a RICO case and let things settle down.

No one talked to Stan Tripp anymore so the feds were bound to haul him in again and send him up

Johnny knew that Stan hadn't told the feds everything, holding back certain facts so he could have some leverage down the line. Johnny didn't want that to happen, so it was time to send Stan to the great spacious residential property in the sky.

Stan lived out in Suffolk County. When we drove past the exit where I'd dumped Jojo's body on the north shore I had a strange sense of déjà vu. I wondered what Vinny had done to get on Johnny's backside. I wondered why Johnny decided to offer him up to me in this way, on the night when we first had to do a real ice job. It didn't make much sense. I looked at things from different angles, imagining one scenario after another. It really wasn't all that hard to think like Johnny Booze. You imagined that you were completely bored with the world and the only pleasure you had left was toying with people's lives and turning those games to your own greatest benefit.

So what was Johnny going to get out of me icing Vinny?

We took Sunrise Highway out to the Hamptons. Stan Tripp had a gorgeous mansion in Bridgehampton right on the beach. I could understand why he'd rat out his friends to keep what he owned. It was always the mooks and the low-level wise guys who would do ten years in the joint without saying a word. They didn't have much to lose. But the bosses and the captains, the guys who ran the syndicates and owned three-million-dollar mansions, they were the ones who'd cut each other's throats to protect the sweet life they'd built up.

Vinny wasn't much smarter than Jojo. He hadn't cased the place, didn't know anything about Stan's schedule. We drove by the beautiful home twice, once heading down to the beach and once heading back. There were lights in the windows. Vinny figured that was all he needed to know.

"Come on, let's go grab a burger someplace."

There weren't any burger joints in the Hamptons. We had to drive for twenty minutes before we found a cheap-looking seafood diner. We ordered crab cakes and Vinny got some oysters on the half shell that he drowned in Tabasco sauce and sucked down one after the other without taking a deep breath between them. When he finished he took a long pull on his beer, wiped his mouth with his napkin, and said, "I knew your old man."

I said nothing.

"He was a good guy."

"No, he wasn't."

"Yeah, you're right, but what else am I gonna say? That he was a piece of shit?"

"Sure."

Vinny put a smile on but his eyes went hard as shale. I thought about who he hated. His mother or wife or girlfriend. His father or brother or maybe Johnny Booze. Maybe everyone, maybe he didn't even know who he was so furious with, and that's why he turned to the life he had.

"You nervous?"

"No."

"It's all right to be a nervous prick. The first one is always different, no matter what they say. The first one sticks with you. The next one, the one after that, those faces all tend to fade."

It wasn't my first one and Vinny Venti was the nervous prick. He'd been a bagman for years. I had the feeling he'd been kicked up to hitter to become a fall guy. He wasn't in charge of anything major.

Back in the car Vinny handed me a snub .38 with the serial numbers filed off. I checked it and made sure it was loaded.

"He's supposed to be alone tonight. We're in and out in two minutes. Nothing fancy. We don't make it look like a robbery, we don't torture the fuck, we don't burn his house down after. In and out."

Vinny drove with his left hand on the steering wheel and kept his right hand in his pocket for the rest of the ride. Looked like he was fingering a 9mm. I had made him a little fidgety and he kept glancing sidelong at me waiting for me to talk or invoke my mother's name or explode. Maybe that

why he'd mentioned my father, to see if he could push my buttons. Maybe Johnny had suggested I make small talk with me.

Then I realized it was a different type of test than I'd originally thought. I checked the .38 again, cocked the hammer, and found that the firing pin had been filed down.

Johnny Booze wanted to see just how strong I was. How tightly I could hold onto my rage. How well I could perform under this kind of duress. It was a setup and a cheap trick. It was a bush league bitch move.

He'd warned Venti that I might take a poke at him. He'd told Venti that if I tried he should spatter my brains all over the place.

I settled back. I almost allowed myself a smile.

I'd been waiting patiently for years to kill my own father. Did he really think I couldn't smile in the face of my mother's rapist and not take it?

We pulled up in front of Stan Tripp's house. The lights were on.

"Aren't you going to ask how we get into his house?"

"I already know how. We're going to ring the doorbell."

"Smart kid. We don't leave any witnesses."

You didn't have to be smart to realize that Stan Tripp was going to open his own front door when a wise guy knocked. You had to be an idiot to think he wasn't going to be armed. It's apparently how things worked. You knew you'd been fingered, you knew the feds couldn't protect you, you knew the mob wanted you dead, but if they came knocking, what were you going to do? Hide in the closet?

"Who else might be inside?"

"A wife."

"Any servants?"

He pulled a face like I was an idiot. "It's a big place but not that big."

It seemed that big to me. We parked and walked quickly up the drive. There was a little stone path that went around through a large lawn that opened up onto a private beach. A motion detector light went on. Vinny Venti rang the doorbell.

Stan Tripp's wife answered the door. She was much younger than I'd been expecting. Maybe twenty-five. A trophy wife with wet, long blonde hair, bee-stung lips, and dressed in an open cotton robe with a one-piece bathing suit beneath. She'd just come in from a night swim and I could see by the front light that there was a dusting of salt across one cheek. I thought Stan was a sack of shit for sending his wife off to answer a door when he knew there might be shooters after him.

She peered out at me and a gust of wind blew her hair dancing over one shoulder. The smell of the ocean made me a little heady. Compared to Coney Island it was fresh and lush and very clean.

She said, "Yes?"

I eased in front of Venti as he drew his popgun and punched her in the face. She was out on her feet but didn't go down. She was a strong lady and I'd pulled my punch at the last second. I tightened up, tapped her on the chin, and caught her before she fell over. There was a fancy chair in the foyer and I put her in it. The robe opened provocatively and Venti couldn't control himself. He was a cheap, flashy grab kind of guy and he reached out and twisted her left breast. His face was hard and full of hate again, but this time it wasn't just for the woman living in the back of his head, but for me. His expression twisted into a leer.

"She didn't witness anything," I whispered.

Venti led as we entered the house. Stan was sitting in the living room on a large leather couch with a .44 in his lap. He aimed it at us but he was shaking badly and a .44 is a heavy gun. The first shot went wild and took out a huge oil painting on the wall behind me. The recoil broke his wrist. I heard the bones snap like a pair of dice hitting the table in a craps game.

I left the snub .38 in my pocket. I walked up to Stan and saw that all the fight had gone out of him. I picked up the .44. It was a stupid gun to defend yourself with if you weren't used to shooting, but I got the feeling that one of his macho pals had talked him into it just because it was such a powerful piece of hardware.

"I'm looking for an apartment," I told him.

He was practically catatonic with fear. I had to slap him to jar him awake a little. "What?"

"I'm looking for an apartment in Manhattan. I want to put a down payment on one now, maybe in an area that hasn't started turning around yet but will be prime real estate in four or five years. Which neighborhoods should I check?"

His eyes focused on me. "Are you going to shoot me?"

"You want me to lie, Stan?" I asked.

"But you're just a kid."

"Would it hurt less if Vinny does it?"

He closed his eyes and raised his head a little as if he was trapped in a moment of martyrdom. "My wife?"

"She's fine."

"Thank God."

I nudged his chest with the barrel of the .44. "Stan. About the apartment?"

He roused and stared at me curiously. "That's a serious question?"

"Why else would I ask?"

He thought about it for a minute, and I could see that while he was running real estate properties, trends, housing developments, and urban renewal, he wasn't afraid at all. His mind was moving along the usual track, checking angles, working schemes. His mouth moved silently. He seemed to have forgotten that we were there, and that he was about to die.

"They're revitalizing Alphabet City," Stan said. "It's been the dregs for a while now, but the East Village continues moving farther east toward the river. In five years it'll be trendy and upscale. Whatever you buy now will be worth ten times that by then."

"Thanks."

Then the full impact of his impending death hit him again and he rocked on the couch. His eyes drifted to Venti and he didn't like what he saw. He stared at me again.

"Do me a favor?" he asked, his eyes full of tears although he was doing a hell of a job of holding them back. "Make it fast, would...?"

I made it so quick that he didn't get a chance to finish his sentence. The .44 bucked in my fist and Stan's head more or less vanished in a surge of blood, bone, and brain matter. The pressure of the blast had popped his eyes loose and they flew off perfectly intact. A Magnum was way too much gun for this kind of a job.

"Why didn't you shoot him with your own pistol?" Venti asked.

"You filed down the firing pin, Vinny. You left me with my ass hanging. If Stan had been a little more steady he could've taken me out."

"No, he couldn't have. You were a rock. You didn't even flinch when he got off his one shot."

I wiped my prints off the .44 and tossed it back into Stan's lap. Venti had to know I wasn't going to pop him. He had to report to Johnny that I wasn't holding a grudge. That I stayed cool and didn't go mad dog when it came to civilians. I wondered if it would reflect badly on me that I'd allowed the wife a glance at our faces. Or that I'd taken a little time out to converse with Stan about real estate first. I figured Johnny would get a kick out of it all, one way or another.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and waited. Venti looked at me with a puzzled expression. Maybe he wanted to apologize for being a part of the chain reaction that had led my father to swallowing my mother's tongue that Christmas. Maybe he was thinking of taking me out just to be sure that

wouldn't come back at him later on. Maybe he was imagining that we would partner up as hitters the future and that I'd take point and do all the dirty work. Or maybe when he looked at me he saw my father and he felt a hot terror working through him.

In any case, he held the popgun at his side, fingering the trigger guard. I was fingering the switchblade in my pocket. If he lifted his arm even the slightest bit I would ram the knife into his throat.

"Come on, let's get out of here before the bitch wakes up," he said.

We left and climbed back into his car and said little on the ride back to Brooklyn. As soon as we got back to our neighborhood he asked, "You really going to move into Manhattan?"

"When I get up enough of a stake."

"It's good that you're thinking ahead. Thinking about your future."

"I always do," I said.

"Even when you walked towards the muzzle of a .44?"

"Even then."

He cocked his head as if thinking about it, then grinned and let out a laugh. The laughter grew. He reached under the dashboard and pulled out an envelope stuffed with ten G's and handed it to me. He turned the corner and pulled over the curb in front of the house, where Angelina was seated on the porch waiting for me. Venti was still chuckling but when he saw Angelina he stopped and gave her a slow look.

"You're a smart kid," Vinny Venti said.

"Thanks," I told him. We shook hands. He was strong with ugly calloused fingers. I thought about them on my mother's flesh. I thought of how much she enjoyed the humiliation and pain he put her through because it was all like the sweetest of caresses compared to the degradation my father doling out. Venti packed a lot of power behind him. I fondled the switchblade I'd taken off Jojo those years ago. I was good with it, much better than Jojo had ever been. I knew how to hold it the correct way. Loosely in your palm. I could pull Vinny to me and drive the knife into his eye and up through his brain pan anytime I wanted. It would happen one day. I wasn't in any rush.

Maybe I was one of the boys and maybe I wasn't. One thing I knew for sure is that I was capable of murdering a man who hadn't done me any wrong. Jojo had been self-defense and personal. This had been stand-up and icy.

I'd picked up another of my father's habits.

I was a stone cold killer.

~ * ~

My old man had been wrong when he said he'd be out in ten years. He went away for thirteen. It was his own fault. If he'd shown some remorse or had given up any of his cronies he would've walked after ten. But it had been an election year and the DA was running on a platform of cleaning up the city and coming down on corruption. Considering the brutality of the crime, as well as my father's other offenses, he got off easy.

Even inside he had some major juice. I heard about it from time to time. How he was living large making big money, held most of C-Block wrapped around his finger. The guards floated him women, liquor, primo drugs, good food, just about everything he might want on the outside.

He even paid ex-con friends to piss on my mother's grave. It was crass, hateful, and stupid, just about everything I had come to expect from my old man. I hadn't visited her grave even once, but when I heard what was happening, I started going. I didn't quite know why. Not to pray or make any kind of amends with her, not to stand over her and protect her from my father's whims, and yet every few days I found myself buying flowers and walking through the tight stone paths of the cemetery to stand before her tombstone.

A winter's afternoon three days before Christmas, I had my collar up, carrying flowers, moving across the icy grounds when I saw some fat bastard with his crank in his hand whizzing on my mother's headstone. The steam rose from the earth like thick trails of smoke, as if the grass was on fire.

He zipped up and took a photo of his urine dripping across my mother's name. Then he turned around and saw me standing there. He must've known who I was. He whimpered, "Oh Christ..."

I was strapped with a 9mm in a holster beneath my peacoat, and we were alone in this part of the cemetery, two hundred yards from the road. I saw he'd left his car running, a pickup truck burning a lot of oil and spewing white clouds from the tailpipe. He had a Christmas tree in back and garlands strung around the antenna.

The guy waited for me to pull my piece. I didn't. He waited some more. I stared at him. He didn't know whether to run or draw his own gun or drop to his knees and beg forgiveness or just take a shot and go blind.

I laid the flowers on her grave. I turned and asked him, "You sent my father a photo?"

He could barely get the word out. "Yes."

"Does he have his own phone all the time or does he have to borrow one of the bulls' or what?"

"It's his own." He held his hands up even though I hadn't pulled my piece. "Look...look...kid...I got nothing to do with any of this."

"Your dick does."

"No no, listen...I mean, this isn't something I wanted to do. It's not like I go around doing this kind of thing. I don't. I'm not a pervert, right? I didn't do time for anything like that. This...this...he made me do this..."

"How?" I asked.

The guy had nothing to say.

"You mean he paid you and you said what the hell."

"He didn't pay in money. My last two nights in the joint he threw a going away party for me. Girls, booze, you understand?"

"You were two days away from all of that anyway, you asshole," I said. "Give me the phone."

He handed it to me with a resigned air and turned back to his truck, wondering if he could make it back to his pickup before I either tackled him or shot him in the back. He looked at my eyes and started to cry.

"Listen, kid...please..."

I checked the last call made and hit redial. My old man answered with an emotionless, "Thank you. Nice picture. What, did you drink a six-pack before you let fly?"

It was the first time I'd heard his voice in over six years. A strange heaviness settled in my chest. The smell of piss was thick enough to make me turn my head away. When I turned back the guy was getting ready to run. I pulled my piece and shot him twice in the chest. He went over backwards across my mother's grave and I put two in his eyes.

I took a photo of his dead face, sent it to my father, and disconnected.

~*~

I became Johnny Booze's torpedo. It's what he'd been after since the beginning. He set me in motion and I did my job. Mostly against other families, occasionally against someone in his own crew who was in danger of being flipped by the feds. If Johnny had even a notion that you might turn rat, you were dead. He'd give me a name and I'd go make the hit. I didn't watch the mark for weeks. I learned his every move. I didn't infiltrate his life. I didn't play act like I needed help with finding a lost dog or that my car had broken down and I wanted a lift.

I stuck to a few basic rules: Never kill a man in front of his family. Never torture him. Never hurt

civilian. Be quiet, clean, and efficient.

~~Most of the marks never saw me coming. If they did, they sometimes dropped to their knees~~ sometimes began to sob, but most of them stood tall. I gave them a lot of credit.

Johnny's crew started looking for a nickname for me. They went through all the regulars trying to get one to stick. The Kid. Iceman. Killshot. They were stupid. None of them took.

No one ever pissed on my mother's grave again.

I was paid well and took Stan Tripp's advice and got a four bedroom place off Avenue A in an area that was already starting to turn around. I didn't stay there on my own, just kept making payments and waiting for the day when Angelina and I could move in together. When we turned nineteen we got married. Johnny Booze was expected to be my best man and he was. I didn't care. I had no friends.

Angelina and I moved into Manhattan. Her mother started to rouse a little and became more active in our lives, shopping with Angelina and talking a lot about grandchildren. They filled the place with classy furniture and fretted down to the inch where to hang paintings and photos. I came home one day and there was a grand piano in the living room. Neither of us could play the piano. I looked at her and she seemed immensely pleased with herself. I shrugged and hoped our kids wouldn't mind taking lessons because their parents needed to have a grand piano in the corner as set dressing.

Angelina had city friends and we made the most of our time there. We went to parties, took in Broadway shows, visited museums. She kept busy whenever I had to go back into Brooklyn.

She knew what I did for a living. On the tax forms it said I was an employee of one of Johnny Booze's fronts. I didn't even know which one. His accountant took care of all the paperwork. The checks were large and the bags of cash even larger. I had caches all around the apartment and three safety-deposit boxes. Angelina accepted the fact that I was a hitter so long as I never hurt a civilian. So long as it was all kept within the syndicate world. She knew these made guys deserved to die five times over. She was glad whenever I pulled a job and took another one of these pricks off the street.

Word had leaked back to my father, of course. Even before I'd iced his man in the cemetery. He started sending me cards a couple of weeks before Christmas. *Hope you are well. See you soon.* He had packages of tongue delivered to Angelina's mother's house. It was crude and obvious. My old man certainly hadn't learned subtlety in the joint. I suspected that my reputation had gotten so large that he was using me as a way to intensify his own standing and build a greater power base in the can. The cards weren't so much a threat against me as a tactic to retain and build upon his position.

I donated the packages to homeless shelters. I didn't know who the hell would be hungry enough to eat tongue but I figured it wouldn't go to waste.

"Does it bother you?" Angelina asked while we were decorating the tree.

"No," I said.

"You could pay someone to take him out in prison. You know the right people."

It made me grin whenever she talked goomba vernacular. She always came down on it too hard. You could hear the air quotes around the words.

I added some tinsel. I stared at the "Our First Christmas Together" ornament that stood out from and center in the branches. "You know that's not how it's going to happen."

"I thought you might want to spare yourself the trouble."

"It won't be any trouble."

"I just can't stand the idea of him having a laugh at your expense."

"He's not laughing."

We finished the tree, went to bed early, made love, watched half of *Miracle on 34th Street*, and fell asleep just as fresh snowfall started brushing past the window. I'd almost nodded off myself when my cell rang. I answered and walked into the living room and sat naked at the piano in the dark.

"I need you here," Johnny said.

I took a quick shower, dressed, and drove across the Brooklyn Bridge back to the Fifth Amendment. It was after two by the time I pulled up in front of the bar. I walked in and the captains and higher up of the crew were already there looking tired and nervous and pissed off. A lot of whiskey had gone around the table. Johnny didn't have a hair out of place and looked like he'd just awoken from a full eight hours. His clothes were impeccable as always. He held a glass of Glenlivet, sipping in between puffs on his cigarette. His cuffs were shot. It was a talent.

"Vinny Venti has become a liability."

"All right."

I never asked why. I didn't need for Johnny to explain himself. One reason was as good, or bad, as another. If Johnny felt the need to give me more information, then he would give it on his own accord.

"I know you've been waiting for this," he said.

I said nothing.

"You've held your grudge against him in check for a lot of years. I want to thank you for that. I know you did it for me."

I said nothing.

"He got picked up tonight after a Christmas pageant at the middle school, wagging his dick at some little girls backstage. They're dressed like Christmas angels with paper wings and tinfoil halos and here the pervert comes whacking his meat in front of them. I knew he had issues with women but I had no idea he was that kind of a sick son of a bitch. It's a morals charge, nothing too serious. He didn't touch the kids or anything like that. But so far as I'm concerned, it's bad enough. I don't need to be associated with that kind of scumbag. I'm already going to catch heat for having had a short-eye on my crew. I need him ached. But not in your usual manner."

I said nothing. I knew what he was about to ask me to do.

"I have to send a message. You understand that. I need for everybody...and I mean everybody—the cops, the wise guys, the people in our neighborhood—to know I'm not going to put up with that, not from one of my own boys or anybody else. This message, it has to be loud and clear."

"I don't send messages," I said.

"You're going to this time."

The crew all glared at me. They were angry with me for not showing any reaction. They wanted me to foam at the mouth and talk about how we couldn't let child molesters prowl our streets. Vinny didn't have many friends to begin with, and now he had none. I let them glower.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"He was booked at your father's old precinct. They'll arraign him Monday morning, probably send him to a psych ward for observation. He'll tell them how he didn't get to suck on his mother's tits as a kid and they'll send him to group therapy twice a week for two months. That's not good enough for me." He ground out his cigarette butt and took another sip from his glass.

I walked behind the bar and dug around in the fridge until I found a can of beer. I poured it out into the sink and crushed the can underfoot. The crew watched me. They muttered and giggled anxiously. A couple of them kept giving me the death stare. I pocketed the flattened can and left.

~*~

I drove directly to the precinct. I knew it well. It was the most corrupt precinct in the city regardless of the ticket that the DA ran under when my father was sent up. I knew a lot of the old cops by name. It was third shift, but a busy time. Christmas, a Friday night, and a little after two in the morning, when a lot of the bars closed. The drunk and disorderlies were being brought in. The hookers who were sneaking too much out of the pockets of their johns. The johns who'd fought with their wives and taken it out on their whores. The out-of-towners who'd been ripped off.

The junkies and bums were picking up extra cash thanks to the spirit of giving in the air. The

meant more overdoses, more rummy fights over the bottle.

~~I walked in the front door and entered a noisy throng of bodies. There was a bigger crowd than I~~ been expecting. I recognized the desk sergeant trying to process everyone and keep the peace. His name was Mooney. He'd been one of my father's pals. He was so distracted I slipped right by him.

Vinny Venti might be a short-eyes but as of the moment he was still one of Johnny Booze's crew. They would afford him some respect. He'd have a private cell on the second floor, not the communal cage on the first.

The worst security in the world can be found in any police precinct. There's so many cops around that they expect everyone else to be guarding the place, watching prisoners, checking to make sure the evidence and firearm lockers were secured. The dirty cops have free rein of the place, and, by extension, so do the criminals.

I walked fast and comfortably with my chin high, took the stairs up looking like a lawyer who deserved to be there. I even passed a yawning cop on the stairs. I nodded to him and he nodded back.

There were twelve single cells on the second floor in the south wing. They were all filled. I recognized a few faces. The ones I didn't recognize recognized me. The floor was quiet but it grew even quieter.

Vinny Venti was in the last cell down the corridor. Since all the cells were full, no cops should show up in the wing until morning. I knew I should move fast, do what I had to do and get out quick but I felt a little sluggish, my thoughts constantly drawn back to that Christmas day.

Vinny Venti was sleeping on his cot. He'd made himself at home. He'd kicked off his shoes and had his coat over him like a blanket. He was snoring loudly. I could smell the sambuca on his breath. He'd started early in the day. He'd been drunk at the Christmas pageant otherwise he never would have flashed himself to little girls in so public a spot. It made me wonder how long Vinny had been doing things like this, and how far he'd gone with the girls, and why he should snap during the holidays.

"Vinny," I called. He kept snoring so I raised my voice. "*Vinny.*"

He snorted and nearly rolled off the cot. He woke up angry, his features contorted in a bitter rage. He suspected wasn't only because he'd been locked up. The holidays; if you had a chink in your arm they'd stick the knife in.

He glanced tiredly around the cell. Then his eyes focused and his gaze settled on me.

"Heya, kid," he said.

"Hello, Vinny."

We stared at each other for a while. Maybe he was hoping I would go away. Maybe he thought I was just another piece of his ongoing nightmare. The guilt and shame hung heavily in his face.

"I never did anything like this before," he said. His voice was resonant with honest soulfulness. "I'm not a short-eyes."

"I believe you."

"I don't know what I am, but I'm not that."

"Okay."

I turned and checked back down the corridor. A few of the other prisoners had pressed themselves against the bars, listening to us. It didn't matter. By the morning the news would be all over the circuit. My name wouldn't be mentioned.

Vinny stood up, ran a hand through his hair, tried to straighten his tie a little. "Don't suppose you'd consider letting me slide for old time's sake?"

"Not even if you hadn't humiliated my mother and gotten the ball going the day my old man murdered her."

"That ball was rolling way before me kid."

I nodded.

“You supposed to send a message?”

“Yes.”

He finally cracked. A wild sob broke in his chest and his knees trembled. Panic filled his eyes and he glanced from side to side like he was looking for an escape route. “Oh Jesus. Not like that, kid, not like that. Please, I’m begging you. I was good to you, wasn’t I?”

I wondered if he was talking about the two hundred dollar bills he’d handed me after curing and fucking my mother. I thought again about how she must have found some solace in his rancor. I remembered standing in the hall and glimpsing his sweaty, furious face in the bedroom mirror. The way my mother had stared into his eyes.

I said, “Relax. That’s just for show. It’ll be post-mortem.”

“You’re gonna stuff my prick down my throat, aren’t you.”

“No. It’s got to look like a suicide.”

“So you’ll just hack it off.”

“You won’t feel a thing by then, Vinny.”

He looked heavenward. “My Christ, it’s a good thing I don’t have children. How embarrassing.”

“Come over to the bars, Vinny.”

“Ah my God, I even have to walk to you, don’t I? I’ve got to give you my throat.”

“You don’t have to.”

“You’ll just catch up with me later and make it worse then.”

“Yes,” I admitted.

He squared his shoulders and tried to man up. It wasn’t an easy thing to do. A few of them managed it, most of them didn’t. A shudder went through him so violently that it nearly knocked him off his feet. Then he steeled himself and his expression shifted to rage. I recognized his fury. Twisting black bulging veins covered his throat.

“Johnny should’ve at least let me tell my side of things,” he said. “He should’ve been willing to listen to me. I’ve worked for him for twenty years and now, a couple hours after I get in trouble, he wants to see me dead.”

“It’s the life Vinny. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know that.” He sniffed heavily and sighed. “That day at Stan Tripp’s house, when you were holding the .38 with the firing pin filed down...I would’ve put one in your head if you’d even thought about turning the barrel on me. Johnny said you might. He said you held a grudge in check but with a gun in your hand you might not be able to control yourself. He doesn’t have any idea who you really are. You don’t ever lose control.”

He started to laugh. He wheezed and gasped and held his belly. He wasn’t laughing at me. He wasn’t laughing at anything. He was scared of dying and his body and mind were in a riot of confusion. I let him go on.

When he finally stopped he sat there sucking air deeply into his chest, his eyes clear and his face ruddy. I asked, “Who is she, Vinny? The woman you hate so much. She’s the one who sent you here. She’s the one who sent you to my mother’s bed.”

“I always knew it would be you who iced me. I knew it the day your old man killed your mother. I knew it.”

“I always knew it too,” I said. “Who was she?”

“Does it matter?”

I said nothing.

“My sister. Gloria. She’s a year older than me. She had double D’s when she was thirteen. I screwed with my head. Messed up every relationship I ever had. I always wanted to fuck her. She lived

in Phoenix but she came back and visited the neighborhood today. My niece, she's sixteen and look just like her. It got to me. It made me crazy." He started sobbing but collected himself almost at once. He thumbed the tears off his face. "I'd never hurt a little girl. It was the fucking sambuca. Gloria brought it. I should've known it would be my poison."

"Do me a favor and drop your pants."

"Oh Christ."

He did as I asked and unbuckled his trousers. They slid to the floor and he stepped out of them. I motioned that he should continue. He got out of his briefs as well.

"Sit on the floor."

"Don't let me feel anything."

"You won't."

"Okay then." A look of something like peace filled his face, a kind of martyr's grace. "Kid, you believe in God?"

I didn't answer. I took out the switchblade, reached between the bars, took gentle hold of his hair and slashed open his throat. He didn't die instantly and he didn't die well. I turned his head away and the blood spurted across his cell. He struggled and tried to plead with me some more but I'd nicked his vocal cords. The plaintive, terrified noises he made sounded like a trapped, dying animal, which I was. The blood kept arching and painting the far wall of the cell. As he died the spurts weakened until his blood just bubbled and stopped.

Vinny Venti slumped back against the bars and immediately began to vent. I got to work with the beer can. I tore it in half so that there was a nice sharp metal edge. The cops would think it was just Christmas trash that got kicked around on the floor.

It didn't take much time sawing to cut off his cock and balls. I put the beer can in his left hand and his dick in the other. It would look like he was so distraught he cut his own throat and in a fit of rage slashed off the thing that had led to his downfall. Even if they suspected anything else, they wouldn't be able to prove it.

My hands were covered in blood. I walked to the next cell and told the man there, "Give me a rag." He did. I wiped my hands off and threw it back to him.

Then I walked down the hall, back down the stairs, and out the precinct front door.

~ * ~

The message was sent. It was completely unnecessary. Everyone already knew not to mess with little kids. Anyone who did wasn't going to think twice because of what happened to Vinny Venti on the second floor. They already knew what happened to a short-eyes in prison. It didn't stop there. Vinny had been right. Johnny should have at least listened to his side of the story first. And as bad as wagging his willy at some girls might be, it wasn't rape. He hadn't been a short-eyes.

I spent the two hundred dollars that Vinny had given me all those years ago on groceries for a big Christmas Eve dinner I was preparing. The money had been folded for so long that it had almost split through at the seams, but the store clerk took the bills. I cooked antipasto, baked ziti, ham, and made a couple of devil's food cakes from scratch. My mother had taught me how.

Angelina's parents came over, and so did a dozen of her friends. We ate, drank sambuca and wine—except for Angelina—and they told stories and jokes with references to people and events that I didn't understand or care about. I laughed anyway. When her father got good and roaring drunk he shocked everyone by sitting at the piano and playing Christmas songs. Neither Angelina nor I knew he could play. I had never heard him actually laugh before.

At midnight the party started to wind down and that's when Angelina told everyone the good news. She was pregnant. With twins.

Her mother called it a miracle; I'm not sure why. Her girlfriends swarmed forward and started

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