



Fish Farm

Revenge will
be sweet?

Walt Sautter

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by

WALT SAUTTER

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Chapter 1

"Country Livin' "

"Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

The Lord's Prayer rings through the church, the choir just finishing its rendition and the priest, seated at the far wall of the sanctuary, stands up to approach the pulpit. Solemnly, he peers into the mass of seated parishioners, before beginning his sermon - his voice echoes loudly as he speaks:

"Romans, 12:17-21: 'Repay no-one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable, in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.'" Finally, he concludes: "For it is written: 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'."

Jack and his wife - a couple in their early sixties - are seated in the front pew. They sit with hands folded; Jack appears particularly attentive, as though hanging on every word.

When the service has ended, the priest makes his way to stand at the doorway, greeting the parishioners as they leave. Jack and his wife wait in line.

“Thank you, Father - your message was truly inspirational. If only we could all live by those words.”

“Thank you, Jack. But those are not my words - they are the words of God. I merely pass them on, to those who are willing to receive them and act accordingly. The peace of the Lord be with both of you.”

*

Jack sits in the passenger's seat of the beat up '92 Pontiac, being driven by his friend Petey - a balding, portly sixty-eight-year old.

It is early afternoon and they drive along a desolate country road, bordered by nothing but woods and farmland.

Then, suddenly, flashing red and blue lights are illuminating the rear-view mirror.

“Hey, Jack, what’s this cop want? He’s right on our ass!” Petey exclaims, nervously.

Jack turns in his seat, to look through the rear window. “How the fuck should I know? Better pull over.”

They pull over and wait nervously, as the cop car pulls up behind them. A few long seconds pass before the cop exits his car and approaches.

They watch, as he momentarily stops, eyeing the large box which protrudes from the Pontiac’s trunk, before continuing toward the driver’s window.

“How are you gentlemen doing today?”

“What’s the problem officer?”

“What’s in the box in your trunk?”

Jack stares straight ahead in sweaty silence. After a second or two, he turns to face the cop, struggling to conceal his anxiety; "It's a television. We're takin' it up to a friend."

"Television, huh? In a box that big?"

"It's an old one," Jack interjects.

At this, the cop turns and again walks to the rear of the car. He looks over the box once more, before returning to address Petey: "Just where exactly are you taking it?"

"We're takin' it to Larry, up at 'Larry's Fishin' Hole', a couple of miles up the road."

Immediately, the cop strikes a less threatening pose and tone and smiles; "Oh, you mean Larry Fine. Known him for years - I take my kids up there fishing now and then." He pauses, then continues:

"Anyway, the reason I stopped you is because you can't have that box hanging outta the trunk like that, without a flag on it. A piece of cloth will do it - a red

piece would be best.”

Looking over the clutter in the back seat of Petey’s car, the cop points to an old shirt lying on the back seat: “That plaid shirt there - you can use that.”

Jack reaches back over the seat for the shirt.

“That’s about it, boys. By the way, tell Larry that Tim Harbor was asking about him. Have a good day.”

And, with that, the cop gets into his car and drives away.

Jack expels a sigh of relief.

He gets out of the car and proceeds to hang the shirt over the protruding box. When done, he gets back in the car and they start driving.

“Man, that was a close one!” Jack sighs.

“What do you mean?” asks Petey.

Jack hesitates for a moment, before starting to speak, rather unconvincingly: “Well... you don’t have the money to pay for a ticket, do you?”

“Oh, yeah - I see what you mean,” Petey agrees.

“Yeah, that was a close one.”

They are driving for several more minutes before a sign appears in the distance: *“SORRY - NO FISH ARE BITIN’ TODAY. CLOSED FOR REPAIRS.”*

Still, they turn in and drive down the long, dirt lane adjacent to the sign.

A dust cloud is pouring from the rear of the car as they drive - this is Sticksville, for sure.

*

Larry appears a burly, unshaven man, with a long, scraggy white pony-tail and several missing teeth. He has faded tats on both arms - reading “Nam 68” and “Khe Sanh” and a huge keloid scar on his left cheek.

Sitting in the rocker on his dilapidated porch, he wears faded blue jeans and an unbuttoned, ragged, red and black flannel shirt, with cut-off sleeves; his large, shaggy, red mongrel dog, Rusty, lies next to him.

Larry slowly rocks back and forth as the Pontiac approaches. Even as Jack and Petey get out of the car, he continues to rock.

“You got it here alright, I see.”

“Hope it’s gonna work okay, after that ride along your road there,” replies Petey.

“Oh, it’s gonna work just fine, I’m sure,” Larry answers confidently, with a broad grin.

Petey goes to the trunk and starts to untie the box.

“No, leave ‘em on,” Jack calls out.

“Well, how are we gonna get it out of the trunk and into the house, if we don’t untie it?”

“You didn’t tell ‘im, Jack?” Larry remarks.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Guess ya wanta make it a surprise, huh?” Larry says, with a laugh.

Jack is silent for a moment.

Then, he turns to Petey, who stands, perplexed, still holding onto the cord which secures the box: “Listen,

Petey - there's no TV in there. Come over here and sit down for a minute." Jack motions toward the porch.

As they sit, he proceeds to explain and Petey listens, silently, in a trance-like state.

When Jack finishes, Petey exclaims, in astonishment: "You gotta be shittin' me!"

"I couldn't tell you, because I thought maybe you wouldn't bring me up here if I did."

"I probably wouldn't have!" replies Petey. "But, guess what: it's too late now, isn't it? So, what happens next?"

"Well, we're gonna get rid of that 'TV' now, once and for all. If you wanta come along, Petey and help out, that's okay; but, if you'd rather just stay here and wait, that's okay too."

"Let me tell ya, though: it ain't gonna be pretty," Larry warns.

"I'm in too deep now - may as well go along for the whole ride," Petey replies, with a sigh. "Let's go."

“Petey, we gotta drive down to the pond,” says Jack.

“No, wait a minute,” Larry interrupts; “We can’t just throw it in there - we gotta do some preparin’ first.”

Jack seems surprised; “What do ya mean?”

Larry points toward a dirt path, which leads to the rear of the house; “Come on - pull it around the back by the garage; follow me.”

Giving Jack a quizzical look, Petey gets back into the car. He drives slowly behind Larry and Jack, following them around the house.

The garage is an old, partially dilapidated building, with hinged doors, which Larry swings open, to reveal walls lined with old car parts, rusty tools, and scrap lumber. In the middle of the unit stands a large machine.

“What’s that?” exclaims Jack.

“Meatgrinder - commercial grade!” Larry answers, proudly.

“What do we need it for?” asks Petey, anxiously. He is starting to hope the answer won’t be what he is

suspecting.

“Get the box outta the trunk - I’m gonna show ya,” Larry says, as a look of realization is also starting to spread across Jack’s face;

“Holy shit!”

Larry explains: “Ya didn’t think we were gonna just throw him in the pond in one piece, did ya? I mean, my guys are pretty good at eatin’ stuff, but they’re not piranhas! If we don’t cut him up it’ll take days - if we do, it’ll be minutes.”

So, Petey backs the car up to the garage and gets out. Walking to the trunk, he starts to untie the box.

“Is this thing going to handle it, bones and all?” Jack asks, timidly.

“Ya gotta quarter up the legs first - then it’ll do ‘em just fine,” Larry assures him.

“How do you know?”

“‘Cause I done it before. Let me tell ya how I got this thing in the first place: I us’ta have a huntin’ buddy -

Ralph; we always got a couple of deer every season - and sometimes in-between seasons, too, if ya know what I mean. Anyway, Ralph was really into making venison sausage, so he bought this grinder here. Then, about ten years ago, the price of the liver that I usta feed the fish with went sky-high, so what I did was: after we dressed out our deer, I took the guts from 'em and ran 'em through the grinder - made perfect fish food, for free."

"But, the deer guts didn't have bones in 'em, did they?"

"No, but I usta run the feet and the leftover bones through, too and they went in just fine."

"You said it was your buddy Ralph's machine. How come you got it?"

"Ralph hasn't hunted in five years now - he can't no more."

"How so?" asked Jack.

"It seems that poor Ralph was using the grinder and he got his hand caught - it took off all his fingers,

includin' his trigger one. After that happened, he didn't want no part of this machine, so, I got it."

Petey has untied the box and they wrestle it from the trunk to the ground, before dragging it into the garage, where Jack untapes it.

Then, he opens the box and rolls out the plastic bag containing the body.

Larry takes a sheet of plywood, which was standing against the wall and lays it on the garage floor, in front of the grinder; they roll the bag next to it. Jack draws a pocket knife, which he uses to slit the plastic bag open.

As the body is exposed, Petey flinches at the sight of it. *There he is, just as pristine as the day Jack packaged him up.*

On seeing the corpse, Larry spontaneously blurts out a grisly compliment to Jack: "Don't smell bad at all, considerin' it's been a bunch of days, now. Ya done a real good job - I don't think an undertaker coulda done as good as you did, Jack."

"Jesus Christ!" Petey suddenly exclaims. "That's

one of the guys that forced me down to the bank that day - one of those 'Fireman Gang' guys. As a matter of fact, he looks like the boss-man."

"Well, he won't be doin' any more collecting from ya now, that's for sure," remarks Larry, as they heave the body onto the plywood.

Larry goes to the rear of the garage, returning moments later with a yellow rain slicker, a shower cap, an old scuba mask, and a small electric chainsaw. He points to the body: "Strip him down and stand back."

"Did you ever do this before?" Petey asks, nervously. "To a human-being, I mean."

"Can't say as I have," Larry answers calmly. Then, he looks up at Petey and smiles; "Ya know what they say, though: the first time is always the best!"

As Jack strips the body, Larry puts on the slicker, mask and cap. Then, he starts up the chainsaw, with which he proceeds to dismember the body.

After removing one of the arms, he points out a pile

of plastic leaf-bags, calling out to Jack: "Grab one of those bags over there, put it under the machine and run this through." At this, Larry holds up the arm, for Jack to take.

Jack swallows hard and hesitates. Then, he slowly reaches out for the severed arm.

"Come on, man!" snaps Larry. "You didn't think this was all on me, did ya?"

Timidly, Jack starts the grinder and follows Larry's commands.

A loud crunching noise resounds from the machine, as it struggles to consume the arm. Within minutes, though, the limb has been pulped and spewed into the bag Jack holds beneath it.

A long hour passes before Larry and Jack have finally finished grinding the body to mincemeat, all of which now fills the plastic bags.

Larry leans the blood-covered plywood sheet against the garage door, along with the slicker, cap and mask

lying next to it and washes everything down with a hose. Petey, meanwhile, has just finished vomiting at the side of the garage.

Larry grins and says to him: "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Petey replies, with vomit still dripping from his chin: "Not so bad!?! It was fuckin' awful!"

Ignoring him, Larry points out a wheelbarrow and shovel, leaning against the side of the garage; "Tie the bag up, so he doesn't spill out on the way down. And, get that wheelbarrow and shovel."

He spots a can next to the wall; "Oh, yeah - bring the kerosene can, too."

Petey obliges and together they start to lift the plastic bags into the wheelbarrow.

"Get his clothes and put 'em on top," commands Larry. Petey gathers up the pile of the dead man's clothes and puts them, too, into the wheelbarrow - he sees that Larry is still grinning.

“Okay,” Larry instructs, “let’s get down there - it’s already past their lunchtime.”

He wheels the barrow to the fish pond, as Jack and Petey follow. Once there, he cuts the first bag open, revealing the red, pulpy mass it contains and, grabbing the shovel from Petey, dumps a shovelful into the pond.

They watch the bright red pools appear in the water, as the mush splashes into the pond; then, within seconds, the color dissipating, as the fish swarm. As Larry works, they voraciously devour every shovelful in an instant. Finally, Larry shovels the last of the body’s remains into the pond.

He then washes what remains from the bag, with the help of his garden hose, before pointing to an old, rusty fire barrel; “Throw his clothes in that barrel over there - we’re gonna burn them; we don’t want any trace of him left - not so much as a fart.”

Jack tosses the pile of clothes into the barrel and Larry pours kerosene on them, before setting them

ablaze. The three men stand in silence, watching, as the flames leap from the barrel.

After a while, Jack asks: "Do you think that will get rid of everything for sure?"

"No worryin' - if anything got spilled, the rats will take care of it, pronto," Larry assures him.

Chapter 2

"On The Way Down"

Jack looks good for his age, as he stands before the window of his shabby, third-floor walk-up and stares out into a cold, grey day.

Though in his late sixties, he has the appearance of one in his mid-fifties - an athletic look, further evidenced by the absence of the usual "beer belly", sported by many men of his age - and he stands erect, lacking the stoop one might expect of an elderly man. He bears a full head of hair, with little greying, except at the temples and a little in the eyebrows; when he neglects to shave, snow-white whiskers help to reveal his true age - it is for this reason that he rarely appears publicly unshaven. Laziness has never deterred him from his morning grooming duties - it is only when the rare bouts of devastating discouragement and despair overwhelm him

that he fails to attend to them.

“Looking good on the outside just may help to make you feel better on the inside,” he tells himself. Unfortunately, his self-admonishments don’t always work so well.

In spite of his attention to his outward appearance, Jack’s constant inner voice – his vengeful thoughts – continue to wear on him mentally.

How did it happen? he thinks to himself, for the millionth time. Though it is rhetorical – he knows the answer. Still, it is hard to accept, without stirring up the rage which boils within him.

Fearing the angst this repeatedly causes, he chases the thought away and continues to stare.

Relief is brief, as again it floods his memory, as though he is right there once again, back on that Wednesday morning.

He was seated at his desk, working. It was approaching six o’clock when the door opened and in

walked Mark, his co-worker.

“Don’t you ever go home?”

Jack looked up and replied: “Gotta finish this up. Why are you here?”

“I left early and forgot my phone - hadda come back for it. You know there’s no time-and-a-half here, don’t ya?” Mark quipped.

“Yeah, I know.”

“A day’s work for a day’s pay... not a day-and-a-half’s work for a day’s pay,” Mark answered.

“I guess I’m just a company man - always have been. Can’t help myself - that’s just the way I was raised.”

“So, you’re blaming your mother for your being stupid,” Mark answered, with a laugh.

“Gotta blame somebody and it can’t be me,” Jack replied, turning back to his work.

“Well, have a good night. See ya tomorrow.” Mark closed the door and disappeared.

Staring through the dirty window-pane of his dingy

tenement apartment, Jack continues to recall what happened several days later.

He was working at his desk, the door opened and again Mark was there. Only, this time there were no smiles or cajoling comments.

“Hey, Bud. It’s here.”

“What’s here?”

“Remember all those rumors that were going around?” Mark answered. “I told you a month ago - about the big guy selling off a shitload of company stock.”

“Yeah, I remember!” Jack replied. “I told you that I’d heard both of Wheeler’s daughters were getting married and the receptions weren’t going to be held at a VFW hall and I thought that was why he was selling.”

“Looks like you guessed wrong!” Mark paused for a moment, then continued: “Well, it doesn’t make any difference anyway - the Feds are downstairs right now. Better start packing.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jack.

“Tyron is belly-up! The party’s over: bankruptcy!”

“But... our stock price is up... and...” Jack began to stammer in reply.

Two men in black suits appeared at the door, behind Mark, who stepped aside. They entered, holding up their badges and one of them explained tersely:

“We’re sorry to tell you that Tyron has declared bankruptcy; we’ll have to ask you to gather your personal belongings - someone will inspect them at the door on your way out. Thank you for your cooperation.”

At that, they both turned abruptly and headed to the next office down the hall.

Jack slumped back in his chair, startled.

An hour later, he went to his car, carrying a paper shopping bag, filled with the meager possessions he had salvaged from his desk. He put the bag in the backseat, then got in.

Jack just sat, clutching the steering wheel, in Tyron’s

nearly-empty parking lot, as he stared straight ahead, in a trance-like daze. At the far side of the parking lot, a cat was approaching a large flock of blackbirds, which then soared away from the puddle at which they had been drinking; he watched as they vanished into the distant, grey mist.

Jack sighed deeply and started the car, before he, too, vanished into the mist surrounding Tyron.

*

He stands solemnly before the closed coffin, meeting the line of mourners; his daughter, Jane, stands by his side.

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am. She put up a long, hard fight.”

“Thanks, Arnie,” Jack answers.

“I’m sorry - I don’t know what else to say.”

“Thanks,” Jane replies. “She was a good woman and a wonderful mother.”

A little while later, Jack is on the sidewalk, looking back at his daughter, who stands in the doorway of his old house.

“Do you think you have everything?” she calls out. “Look around again, just to be sure.”

“No, I’m sure. I can’t take much with me, anyway – it’s only three rooms, you know.”

She points to a large cardboard box on the doorstep, filled with pictures and books, upon which sits a frame of military medals and decorations. “Okay, grab the box and let’s go,” she replies.

He puts the box into the trunk of her car, along with several others and they both get in.

“Thirty-five years, gone in a flash!” Jack mutters to himself, as they drive.

“What?”

“I was just thinking out loud.”

He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out an envelope, which he opens. As he begins to read its

unfolded contents, Jane looks over at him;

“What’s that, Dad?”

“Kinda funny - this is the last piece of mail that I get at my house and it’s also the last of your mother’s medical bills.”

“Do you have enough to pay it?”

“Just as soon as the house closes, I will - might even have a little bit leftover, to buy a couple of boxes of cigars.”

“Whatever happened to the medical insurance?”

“That got cut off when I left Tyron and your mother’s pre-existing condition - as they called it - made getting cover on my own impossible,” he explains, bitterly.

They ride some in silence, as Jack refolds the bill and stuffs it back into his pocket.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay with us?”

“You know I can’t do that, Honey,” Jack answers, solemnly.

*

The thoughts and images flash through his mind almost daily; at times, they nag him to near-exhaustion.

He starts to know that only retribution can set him free of the malignant recollection which incessantly gnaws at him and, although he consciously rejects the idea of vengeance, he knows, deep down, it is his only path to deliverance, from this angst which steadily besets him.

The ringing of the telephone startles him out of his trance-like thoughts.

“Dad! Did you see the TV today?”

“No,” he replies.

“Turn it on - they have the verdict.”

“Okay!” Jack hangs up the phone and snaps on the TV.

“This latest news bulletin: James Wheeler, Hal Meter

and several other high-ranking executives, who were found guilty in the collapse of Tyron, have been sentenced today - Mr. Wheeler, who has been free on bail for the past year, has been sentenced to six months in jail and ordered to pay a ten-thousand-dollar fine, while Meter and those others convicted, each received fines of up to five thousand dollars and have been ordered to carry out three months of community service.

“Judge Arthur Gavin instructed Mr. Wheeler to report to jail in two weeks, deferring to his attorney’s request for more time, so that he may get his affairs in order. Here comes John Hurley - Wheeler’s lawyer - now;

“Mr. Hurley, can you give us your opinion of today’s sentencing?”

“I think Judge Gavin was extremely fair and justice prevailed. The judge’s sentence speaks for itself - I have no more to say. Thank you.”

Jack rocks back in his chair and clicks off the TV, as

his stomach churns and a feeling of sickness overcomes him. Swallowing hard, he drags his hands over his face.

““Six months and ten thousand dollars’!” Jack repeats the words to himself; ““Justice prevailed... Extremely fair’!”

The words continue to echo over and over in his head, amplifying upon each rebound.

The phone rings again.

“Some bullshit! What do you think, Dad?”

“Well, it’s the way things go,” Jack replies, bitterly. “Justice in America isn’t based on black or white, as some people would have you think - it’s based on green! I guess it’s always been this way. Maybe someday it’ll change, but I’m not so sure - not unless someone makes it happen.”

“You’re right, Dad. Have you thought any more about my idea of you moving in with us? You know how I hate to see you living down there - I worry every day. I know the neighborhood - or should I just call it ‘the

'hood'; it's really unsafe and I worry!"

"Listen, Honey - we've been over this a million times: I'm not about to give up my self-respect. I really appreciate your concern and your offer, but I can't. I know this area isn't the best, but I'm okay - I just watch my step and it works out fine. So, don't worry about me - I'll be okay," Jack answers.

"But, Dad-"

"Now, let's not talk about it anymore," Jack interrupts, changing the conversation: "How're the kids?"

"They're good. I'll call you tomorrow. 'Bye, Dad - I love you."

Chapter 3

"I Think He's Dead!"

Jack hangs up the phone and continues to sit, his eyes scanning the apartment's faded, peeling walls and well-worn furniture.

He is unshaven, with uncombed hair and is still wearing his pajamas, covered by a tattered bathrobe.

"Go out and get some air," he mutters to himself; "have a smoke and forget about it."

After a moment or two, he stands up and heads for the bathroom, to groom himself. He dresses and leaves the apartment.

As he steps through the doorway, he closes the door and rattles the handle. *Gotta make sure it's locked*, he thinks to himself; *not that it would really make any difference – if they want to get in, that lock will only slow them down for a couple of minutes. Besides, what's there to steal?*

He proceeds down the winding, darkened stairs to the front of the building and crosses over to a bench near the sidewalk, which is dirty and littered.

A group of small birds is gathered on the far side and he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a handful of stale popcorn and throws it to them, watching as they eagerly scurry for every morsel.

Suddenly, a blue-jay swoops, chasing the small birds away and devours every speck of the abandoned feast.

Jack leans back on the bench and draws a short cigar from his pocket. He unwraps it, snips the end and lights it and, as the first puff of smoke issues from his nose, he drifts back into his thoughts.

He is back at the club. A snapshot of the first fairway, with its lush, green hue, flashes through his mind, as he exhales, with a long, slow sigh. After a minute or two, the reminiscences fade, along with his faraway stare.

“Hey, man,” comes a voice, over the *tap-tap-tap* of a

basketball, bouncing in the adjacent playground.

Hal is a tall, light-skinned black man, who stands with a bent-over slouch - like a man carrying a heavy load - and walks with a slight limp. With his remaining hair, he sports a crew-cut, which surrounds a glistening bald spot, just above his forehead.

Continuing to speak, he takes a seat beside Jack:
“How ya doin’ today, Jack?”

“Not bad, Hal. How about you?”

“Okay for an old man, I guess. The knee is acting up a little again - other than that, not bad. I guess it’s that old wound from ‘Nam again - they never did get that piece of metal out completely.”

He pauses, then says: “Did you hear about Matty?” Without leaving an instant for Jack to answer, Hal immediately begins the story: “They walked him down to the bank and made him cash his social security check - then they took the money.”

“What do you mean ‘they took the money’?” asks

Jack, excitedly.

“The ‘dues’!” Hal answers; “I thought I told you about it the other day. I guess they haven’t gotten to your building yet. They got a new thing goin’: they come to everybody’s door and say they’re collectin’ for the ‘Fire Prevention Fund’ - they call it the ‘FPF’; they get fifty dollars a month outta everybody. Matty didn’t pay, so they marched him down to the bank and got the money out of him, right there and then.”

“What’s this ‘FPF’ stuff?” asks Jack.

“Here’s what they say; they’ll make sure that no fires start in your apartment if you pay your dues. If you don’t pay, they’ll make sure that a fire *does* start.

“You know Petey, the guy that lives in the building next to me? He refused to give them anything. He’s a pretty tough guy - an old Special Forces guy, from ‘Nam. Well, a week or two ago, he leaves his house to go to the store and when he gets back, his door is knocked off the hinges and his bed is on fire. Lucky he got home when

he did and could put it out in time, or the whole place woulda went up!”

“What happened after that?” asks Jack, eagerly.

“Now Petey’s payin’ his dues, like everybody else,” answers Hal, in a resigned tone.

“Who are these guys, anyway?”

“A bunch of pricks from the neighborhood, here - young guys, you know.” Hal answers. “They started their own gang - they call themselves ‘The Firemen’; they even wear a little tat on the arm: a flame with the letters ‘FM’ in it. They’re just petty crooks and dealers, who decided this is an easy way to make money. And, let’s face it, they’re right! They’re dealing with a bunch of old people - how hard is it gonna be?”

“So, why doesn’t somebody just call the cops?”

“Are you kiddin’? The cops don’t want any part of down here. And second, who’s gonna call? If they find out who it was, you can be goddamned sure that guy’s gonna have some serious problems if you know what I

mean," Hal explains.

They sit silently, Jack slowly puffing on the cigar and Hal thumbing through the newspaper he brought with him.

"Any good news in there?" Jack asks.

"*Yanks* won three in a row," Hal replies; "that's about it."

They continue to sit, Hal sporadically commenting on items he is reading in the paper and Jack courteously responding. After an hour or so, with his cigar consumed to an inch beyond his lips, Jack arises.

"Well, that's about it for today - gotta go up and get supper together. See ya tomorrow."

He turns and walks towards his building's entrance. As the front door closes behind him, with its familiar squeal of metal on metal, he proceeds up the narrow stairs towards his apartment.

*

Jack is lying on the sofa. He has fallen asleep, the television droning before him.

Bang! Bang!

The loud pounding on his apartment door awakens him and, with a start, he immediately springs upright.

The door vibrates again: *Bang! Bang!*

He looks at the time-stamp on the TV screen - it is three-thirty in the morning.

“What the hell is going on?” he mumbles to himself, arising from the sofa and stumbling to the door. Bracing his foot against the bottom of the panel, he cautiously opens it a crack.

He sees Mrs. Murray, his downstairs neighbor - a frail old woman, short in stature, who prominently bears the lines of her age. She wears a short-sleeved, faded blue, smock-like house-dress, with several buttons missing; her grey hair is tied back in a bun, secured by a piece of red yarn.

Through sobbing, she speaks breathlessly. "Let me in! Please, let me in!" she stammers.

He opens the door wide and she hurries inside, slumping, exhausted, into his living-room chair.

"What's the matter?" Jack exclaims. "What happened?"

"I think he's dead!" she answers, through her sobbing. "I *know* he's dead!"

"Who's dead?"

"The man in my apartment."

"In your apartment?"

"He came to rob me," she answers, her voice quaking. "Please, could you get me a glass of water?"

Jack quickly brings her the water and she takes a rapid gulp.

Leaning back into the chair, she takes a deep, long breath; as she exhales, she begins to explain: "I was in the kitchen, opening a can of cat food for Suzy when I heard a noise at my door - a 'thud'. I got up to see what was

going on and suddenly there he was, in the doorway - he broke the door open! He was big and he had tattoos and a crowbar in his hand. He shouted: 'I need some cash. What you got?'

"I was so scared, I could hardly speak; I walked backwards into the kitchen and fell on the floor in the corner. I told him: 'I don't have any, except what's in the drawer.' I pointed to the drawer in the kitchen and he right away started rifling through it. Then, he looked up at me, holding a couple of bills I had in there and he yelled: 'You only got twenty bucks in here!'

"Suzy was hiding in the corner and she tried to run, but she's too old and slow - he caught her and grabbed her by the scruff of the neck. Then, he carried her over to the stove and turned it on and he held Suzy over the burner and yelled again: 'If you don't tell me where the rest of it is, this cat is gonna get lit up!'

"I was frantic! I couldn't let him do that to Suzy - I had to stop him. I saw the cat-food can lid, lying on the

floor next to me and I grabbed it; I got up and rushed him - I sliced it down his neck and blood gushed out, all over. I don't know how I did it, but I did! He dropped Suzy and the crowbar and grabbed his neck, stumbling backward; that's when he slipped on the blood and fell, hitting his head on the radiator. Then, he just lay there, stone-still.

"I probably should have just run out, but I was so scared, I guess I wasn't thinking straight. I went and got a knife from the kitchen drawer, pulled a chair up next to him and I sat there the whole night, frozen; he never moved once. I checked to see if he was breathing a couple of times, but he wasn't. If he'd have woken up, I don't know what I would have done?"

"So, he's downstairs in your kitchen?"

"Yes!"

"I'll be right back. Give me the key and stay right here."

"Here's the key, but you don't need it - he pried the

door wide open.”

Jack slowly walks downstairs, to the floor below, in measured, stealthy steps.

Cautiously, he peers into Mrs. Murray’s apartment. He rounds the corner, into the kitchen.

There he is.

He looks to be in his twenties, at most. His large, lifeless body is lying prone, next to the blood-stained radiator. A large, red, coagulating pool has radiated outward across the floor behind him, encircling his head and a smaller stream of blood has trickled from the gash above his left ear, down his cheek, and over his jaw, partially obscuring the “FM” tattoo on his neck. His eyes are closed, his mouth is open wide, in a frozen scream. Even in death, his face wears the sinister grimace Mrs. Murray described.

From the look of him, Jack immediately knows Mrs. Murray was right, but still he bends down and rests his hand on the man’s chest, to be sure. There is no heartbeat

- he is cold and motionless. Jack feels the wrist – it, too, is cold and pulseless.

“Dead, alright,” he mutters, softly.

Suddenly, he hears the muted creak of a footstep in the hallway. Then, silence, before another footstep.

Slowly, he picks up the knife which is lying on the floor, beside the dead man and moves away from the body, backing into the shadows of the pantry.

Another creak comes from the hallway. Jack carefully peers around the corner of the pantry’s door.

Mrs. Murray is standing in the doorway, her hand over her mouth, staring at the lifeless corpse on her floor.

“I thought I told you to stay upstairs!” Jack scolds.

“I couldn’t stay up there alone - I was so afraid,” she answers, in a tearful, quaking voice. “What am I going to do? What am I going to do?”

Jack lowers the crowbar and hesitates, before starting to speak: “We can’t have this spread all over – he’s a gang member and they’ll want revenge. We can’t call the cops,

either - if they see the cops coming here, they'll find out in no time."

"Then, what should I do?" again she pleads.

"Well, we can't just leave him laying here, on the kitchen floor.

"Let me go upstairs; you stay here - I'll be right back. And, this time, do what I tell you: stay here!"

As Jack leaves, Mrs. Murray takes another knife from the kitchen. Then, she sits back in the chair, next to the body; she holds the knife firmly, ready to strike, should the man awaken.

Jack returns shortly, holding several large plastic garbage bags, a telephone cord and a pair of scissors.

"Get your vacuum cleaner and the hose with it," he tells her.

As she does, he cuts a short piece of the cord and proceeds to fold the man's outstretched arms across his chest; placing the hands together, he binds them. Cutting another piece of the cord, he loops it through the crook of

the knees and draws them together, tying the other end behind the dead man's neck. Tucking the knees up to the chest, he pulls the body into a fetal position, tying it tightly.

Mrs. Murray returns with the vacuum; seeing the body folded into its tucked pose, she stops in the doorway and gasps.

Jack explains: "I have to tie him up, so we can put him in the bag - if we wait any longer he'll stiffen up and we'll never be able to get him in. Give me one of those bags."

She holds a bag out to him.

"No - open the end. When I lift him up, you slide that bag over his head, as far as you can."

She nods.

"Okay, here we go." He lifts the dead man's head and she slides the bag over it, over the shoulders and down, until the upper portion of the body is completely covered.

“Now,” Jack continues, “I’ll lift the other end and you pull the bag all the way over. Okay - one, two, three, pull!”

They persevere until the corpse is finally fully inside the strong bag.

Jack stands upright and speaks, with an air of satisfaction: “Lucky I remembered seeing those bags in the super’s closet - he only just fit. Now, give me the hose and plug the vacuum in.”

Mrs. Murray hands him the hose and, firmly, with both hands, he clamps the bag’s opening around it. “Okay, start it up.”

As the vacuum roars into life, sucking out the air, the bag quickly shrinks, revealing the outline of the body inside. When it is taugt around the body, Jack ties the bag’s opening with a piece of the telephone cord.

“Now, go clean out the bottom of your bedroom closet and bring me the biggest towel you have,” he tells her.

Rolling the bag onto a large towel, together they drag it to the closet.

“He’s not as light as he looks,” Jack comments; “let’s hope he fits in here.”

They roll the bag-encased body off the towel and into the closet; Jack pushes it deep inside, as far as he can.

Breathing heavily, he asks: “Do you have any moth-flakes?”

“Yes.” She retrieves the moth-flakes and Jack scatters them around the floor of the closet. He takes clothes off of their hangers and uses them to cover the body.

“We can’t just leave him here, can we?” she asks, anxiously.

“We’ve got a few days to figure this out - he’s going to keep just fine in that bag, with the air sucked out. Let’s go clean up the kitchen.”

“I can’t stay here with him, in the closet, like that,” Mrs. Murray protests; “I’ll be scared to death. What if he

wakes up?"

"Wakes up!? What are you, kidding me!? Until I see Jesus Christ coming through that door, he's not waking up," Jack replies, sarcastically.

"I still can't stay here - I'm so scared."

Jack pauses and sighs; "Okay, you can come up and stay with me for a while. You can have the bed - I'll stay on the sofa."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" she exclaims, exuberantly. Then, she adds meekly: "What about Suzy?"

Again, Jack pauses and sighs; "Oh, shit! Okay, the cat can come too - just be sure and bring the litter box."

Jack has a hard time sleeping that night. Maybe he should have called the cops, after all! It's too late now: he's already cleaned up the crime scene and hidden the body. As for what he should do next - he'll have to worry about that in the morning.

When six a.m. arrives, Jack is lying on his sofa, wide

awake and he's hardly slept. He's been back downstairs a dozen times, in the middle of the night, checking the bag in the closet, as though if he looked enough times, it would disappear.

He arises and carefully checks on Mrs. Murray, asleep in his bedroom. After he dresses, he once again goes down to her apartment to check the body.

Cautiously, he opens the closet and peers inside. He takes a deep breath, sniffing the air.

Two days later, the body is still in the closet and Mrs. Murray is still staying in his bed, while he sleeps on the sofa. Sucking the air out of the bag seems to be working pretty well - the only odor seeping under the closet door is that of the moth-flakes.

So far, so good, he thinks to himself, checking the closet for the umpteenth time.

Chapter 4

"Divided We Fall"

The next day Jack meets Hal, on the bench in front of the building, as usual.

"Hey, ya know what I heard? I heard the boy that was runnin' that 'FM' gang I was tellin' you about the other day got himself pretty cut up."

"What do you mean: 'cut up'?" Jack asks.

"Well, the way I heard it, he was jumped by an uptown gang and they cut him good - almost ear to ear; he just made it to the hospital in time," answers Hal. "They had to give him a couple of pints, to save him. Too bad!"

"What do you mean: 'too bad'?"

"They shoulda let the son of a bitch die - that's what I mean," Hal replies sternly; "them goin' around, takin' advantage of everybody, like they do. Especially the old

people, like us.”

“Is he still in the hospital?”

“Not from what I hear - couple people said they seen him walkin’ around. That gang kinda stopped collectin’ those dues for a week or so, while he was gone, but from what I heard, they’re right back at it again, now.”

“Do you know what he looks like?” asks Jack.

“Yeah, I seen him a couple of times. He’s a young guy, probably ‘bout twenty-five and big - gotta be two-fifty, maybe. He’s got long dreads and an ‘FM’ tat, right on his neck. Why do ya wanna know?”

“Just wondering,” replies Jack. He is sure that the man of the rumor is actually the one in Mrs. Murray’s closet.

Why they concocted the story, about him being jumped by a rival gang, who knows? But, it certainly shows they have no idea what really happened to him and that is good.

Of course, how could they know? he muses to himself,

with a feeling of self-satisfaction. As far as goes people having seen him, Jack knows it is impossible - their supposed observations must be the result of rumor-mongering, hallucination, or both.

He turns back to Hal: "Did they ever come to get dues from you, Hal?"

"Not yet, but I think they're comin'. They're kinda workin' their way down the block, from buildin' to buildin' - they haven't got to mine yet. I'm pretty sure that they'll be comin' soon... and to your buildin', too."

"What are you going to do when they do?"

"I don't know. I'd like to say that I'm not gonna give 'em nothing, but, who knows? If they got Petey to pay up, then I don't know - he's a tough buckaroo and he paid. What about you, Jack?"

"I don't know, either. I guess I'll have to wait and see."

They both sit on the bench, in silence, Jack puffing on his cigar and Hal staring into the distance until Jack

breaks the silence:

“Did you ever hear of Aesop?”

“‘Aesop’ who? Where does he live?” replies Hal, in a perplexed tone.

“No, Aesop was a famous, old Greek story-writer. He said: ‘united we stand, divided we fall’.”

Again, they both sit silently for a moment.

“Do you know what that means, Hal?”

“Yeah, sure: ya gotta stick together, or you’re done for.”

“Right.”

Silence again.

“Who are we gonna unite and what are we gonna do? We’re all old guys.”

“We’re old, but we’re not dead and we’re not stupid,” replies Jack.

There is another pause.

“Did you ever play *bocce*, Hal?”

“No.”

“Would you like to learn? There’s a *bocce* court, down at the other end of the park - nobody ever uses it. I’ve got the balls. Let’s go down tomorrow and I’ll show you how to play.”

“I guess - it’s gotta be better than sittin’ here all day,” Hal agrees.

“And, Hal, ask Petey to come, too, okay?”

“Sure,” answers Hal.

*

The next day they arrive at the park.

“Hey, Hal, you made it. And you brought Petey with you, too.”

“Yeah - Jack, this is Petey; Petey - Jack.”

The men shake hands.

Petey is short and stocky, with a waist circumference exceeding his chest size. He looks like a former body-builder, who hasn’t seen the inside of a gym in years, but

has still managed to retain some of the assets of his long-past appearance - his arms and shoulders look strong and have somehow maintained the muscular sculpting of his former weight-lifting days. He has a round face and deep-set eyes, with dark, wrinkly "turtle skin" - as he likes to call it - below each and he has large hands, covered with liver-spots. His hair is thin, wispy and receding, yet it covers his entire head. When he speaks, it is in a raspy, growling voice, which camouflages his relatively mild disposition.

"You guy ready for some *bocce* lessons?" asks Jack.

"Guess so."

"You know, when I was a kid, I used to ride my bike down to the park in the summer and watch all the old Italian guys play *bocce* - they spent the whole day there, puffing those short, little cigars, tellin' stories and playing. Some would play *bocce* while others played *pinochle* on the picnic tables, then they'd switch back and forth. They used to let me play once in a while - that's

how I learned. It was a lot of fun, so I saved up my money and bought a *bocce* set.

“Here, let me show you: it’s kinda like bowling and horseshoes combined.” Jack takes out the balls; “I’ve had these since I was a kid. See this little one? It’s the pallino; the first player throws the pallino, then he throws a second, bigger ball and tries to get as close as he can to the pallino. Then, the next guy throws and tries to get even closer. The guy who’s furthest away always gets the next shot, until we run out of balls. Closest to the pallino gets one point for each - thirteen wins.”

They begin to play.

“Hal tells me you live over by him, in the grey brick building,” Jack inquires.

“Yeah, been there for about three years now,” replies Petey.

“How is it?”

“Are you kiddin’? It’s like all the other places in this neighborhood: it’s for shit! But,” Petey sighs,

“everybody’s gotta live somewhere and I guess this is it for us.”

“How’d you wind up here?” Jack continues to question.

“I wound up broke, that’s how - not a pot to piss in.”

“Hal told me that you were in Special Forces, during ‘Nam. How long were you in the service?”

“‘Bout eighteen years.”

“And you didn’t get a good pension?” Jack asks, curiously.

“That’s a long story - a long, sad story.”

“We’ve got all afternoon,” Jack replies.

“I don’t even wanna talk about it.” But, Petey pauses, then speaks again: “Let Hal tell ya - he knows the whole thing.”

Jack turns to Hal, seeing him getting an approving glance from Petey and Hal begins:

“When Petey was in ‘Nam he had a commanding officer and... well, they didn’t see eye-to-eye about a lot

of stuff.”

“Stuff?” interjects Jack. “What kind of stuff?”

“Treatment of the civilians. One day, a girl in the village they’d secured came to Petey and told him the lieutenant had forced her into sex; he’d told her that if she said anything, her whole family would wind up collateral damage if you know what I mean.”

“Sure, I do,” Jack replies.

Hal continues: “Petey is a no-bullshit guy, so he went right up to the lieutenant and told him face-to-face what the kid had said. The lieutenant’s reply was: ‘Why do you give a shit about a little gook kid, anyway? You gotta learn to mind your own fucking business unless you want problems!’ Never denied it - just threatened Petey to keep his mouth shut. Well, Petey’s not the kinda guy that’s gonna back off, so he told the lieutenant he was goin’ higher up with this stuff.” Hal pauses.

“And?” presses Jack.

“The lieutenant went back to the girl and forced her

to accuse *Petey* of doin' what *he* had done before *Petey* got the chance to report it higher."

"So, what happened?" Jack asks, eagerly.

Petey interjects: "I did three years in the brig and got kicked out of the service - that's what happened!"

He continues the story where Hal left off: "Shay - that was the guy's name. He got the girl to testify against me and got some of the guys in our company to say it was true, too. From what I heard, later on, he told them: 'If you don't go with me and say what I tell ya, you'll be the point man on every mission from here on out'. You know what that means: you'll probably be a short-timer; goin' home real soon - in a box.

"So, they all got scared, real quick. They went along with Shay and I got my three years." He pauses and swallows hard.

"And, here's the bitch of it," *Petey* continues, in a bitter tone: "*he* wound up in the Pentagon, a full bird colonel. I heard he retired a couple of years ago - nice

pension, the whole deal.”

“And, what happened to you?” Jack asks, soberly.
“How did you wind up here?”

“When I got out of the service - well, *kicked* out - I went lookin’ for a job. But, what kinda job are you gonna get with my record? Not a good one, that’s for sure. So, I kinda bounced around from one shitty job to the next and I finally wound up here - broke!”

Petey explains: “Never got a military pension, of course - they took my chance of that when they put me behind bars. All I got is some social security and not even very much!”

“Sounds like you really got a screwin’,” Jack interjects, once again.

“I’d say so. And, ya know what? I think about it every goddamn day! I don’t know what’s worse: what happened, or just thinkin’ about it, day after day after day.”

“I kinda know what you mean,” agrees Jack.

“Well, I guess there’s nothin’ I can do about it now,” sighs Petey.

“Maybe not, but I’m not so sure,” replies Jack, resuming the *bocce* game.

Then, he turns to Hal; “Hey, ya know, Hal, you never told me how life treated *you*. We talked a lot, but every time I brought it up, you kinda danced around it. Since we’re all here, spilling out our guts, I think it’s your turn now.”

“Ain’t my turn! No use whinin’ ‘bout things gone by,” Hal replies, in resignation.

“I don’t think anybody’s whining - just telling like it is. What do you think, Petey?”

“I guess,” Petey responds; “I showed you mine - now maybe you should show us yours, Hal.”

Hal answers: “Well, I suppose, but there ain’t a helluva lot to tell: grew up down south - didn’t have shit. Dad got sick and we lived on Social Security - he got what the doctor called ‘dementia’. He was a pretty old

guy when I was born and, Ma, she couldn't work - she had to take care of him; she wasn't gonna put him in any home and I didn't blame her. The homes in those days were run by the state - they were all pretty poor and the ones where black folks went were the worst. Wasn't no visiting nurse, either - not in those days, not where we lived.

"After a while, the money we were getting just wasn't enough, so she hadda get a job. She used ta lock the old man in the bedroom, go to work and hope for the best."

"How about your brothers and sisters," asks Petey: "couldn't they help out?"

"Got no brothers or sisters.

"Anyway, the town we lived near was a good old southern football town - when you went to high school, you was expected to play, unless you was crippled; *everybody* had to play. They'd won thirty-two games in a row when I got there and were state champs five years

straight.”

“So, did you play?” interrupts Jack.

“Are you kiddin’!? Two-hundred and ten pounds, six-foot-two - didn’t have much of a choice, don’t ya think? Ma didn’t want me to play - she was always worried that I’d get real hurt and I could understand that: one person she loved bein’ a mess was all she could take! But, she finally agreed to let me play and I did like it - I was good at it, too; don’t mean to be braggin’, but real good: All-State, three years runnin’! Still got the rushin’ record at my high school, forty-five years later. When I got outta high school, I had a bunch of college offers. I went to State, ‘cause it was close to home and I could help out Ma when I had to. In the end, it didn’t make a lot of difference, ‘cause Dad died before I even started college.”

Hal pauses for a moment.

“Well, anyway... Like I was sayin’: I got a scholarship to State. Well, they called it a ‘scholarship’,

but I kinda saw it as a contract to play football - I don't remember seein' the inside of too many classrooms, but I do remember seein' lots of locker rooms. I played for four years - started three of 'em, second team, All-American, as a senior. Then, after the season, when I was a senior, I got a Certificate of Attendance - no diploma, just the handshake, and the certificate. You know, in those days that was generally the way things worked; most all the guys I played with got the same deal.

"I went home and got a job driving a bulldozer - that was about the best I could do and, believe it or not, that was a pretty good job in my town; I guess I only got it 'cause I was kinda the local football hero."

"So, you became a heavy equipment operator all your life?" questions Jack.

"Nah, only for a year or two. One day, I read in the paper about a guy I played with at State - he was playin' pro ball and doin' okay, so, I decided to call my old coach and ask him to help me out; I knew I was better than that

guy playin' in the pros." Again, he pauses.

"And, so?" Jack prods.

"Well, this was the fifties, you know. Coach told me that there wasn't too much room for a black guy in pro ball... unless you were like Jim Brown."

"What about the guy you saw in the paper - the guy you played with?" asks Petey.

"He was a white guy."

"So, then what?"

"I got a factory job and worked there for forty years. When the company got sold, the pension was sold off, too. That happened a lot in those days - they'd buy a company, steal the pension money and then collapse the company."

"Do you have a family?" Jack interrupts, again.

"Yeah, I raised a family. Wife died in eighty-five: cancer. My son lives in California. I keep in touch, but he's gotta live his own life, too; he's doin' alright, but not great.

“Anyway, I got my Social Security - they couldn’t steal that! And, I get food stamps and a little rent help from the government, so I’m hangin’ in. That’s about it, man and now, here I am,” Hal finally concludes.

“It must really piss you off when you watch football today - guys making millions!” Petey sympathizes.

“Born too soon, I guess,” he replies, with a resigned tone and a sigh. “But, that’s the way it is - what can ya do?”

With the *bocce* game now finished, they all walk home.

Chapter 5

"Fish Bait"

Jack hasn't slept well in four nights now.

He's been back to the downstairs apartment dozens of times, at all hours of the day and night, checking the bag in the closet, still hoping that it might magically disappear. He knows that's impossible, but it doesn't stop his wishful thinking.

Maybe the whole thing was just a bad dream!

But, it wasn't. It is always still there, crumpled in the back of the closet.

No smell yet and it has been four days, now. All is well - only the faint smell of the flakes is issuing from underneath the closet door.

So far, so good, he thinks to himself, but he knows it can't continue - he can't just leave the corpse in that closet forever. But, what to do with it - that is the question.

Just dump it on the street? How would he even get it down the stairs without being seen? It was enough trouble just dragging it from the kitchen to the bedroom. Besides, even if he can dump it, as soon as the body is found, surely a police investigation will follow. Can they trace anything back to him, or the old lady? He has seen a lot of TV crime shows and the investigations now look pretty sophisticated - so, who knows? *Probably a good chance they can*, he thinks.

Jack rises from the sofa, as the sunshine streams in through the window. This night was a little better than usual: he got about four hours sleep - two hours more than the last two nights. It is now eight o'clock.

The bedroom door is still closed - she isn't up yet. Mrs. Murray is another problem. He certainly can't let her stay with him indefinitely and he knows that she isn't going back downstairs while the body is still there.

He dresses and walks down to the front of the building, again checking the closet on the way. The

weather is warm and the breeze is light. He sits on the bench and lights his usual daily cigar.

“So, this where you guys hang out,” announces Petey, as he approaches.

“Hey, Petey. Yeah, this is it. Sit down.” Jack points to his shirt pocket; “Do you smoke? I got an extra one right here.”

“Nah! Thanks anyway, but I gave up smoking when cigarettes were thirty-five cents a pack - I know if I smoke a cigar I’ll be right back. I used to do a pack and a half a day. I don’t want to take a chance if you know what I mean.”

“Sure, I understand,” agrees Jack. “Hey, how did you like that *bocce*?”

“Pretty good - a lot of fun.”

“Wanta play tomorrow? I’ll get Hal.”

“I’d like to, but I’m going fishing. Did you ever fish?”

“When I was a kid - not since then,” answers Jack.

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah, it was fun - nice and relaxing; quiet. I’d even say *serene*.”

“So, do ya wanta go tomorrow?” Petey asks.

“I’d need equipment and a license... I’m sure you need a license - when I was a kid you did.”

“No, not where I’m going,” Petey explains; “I’m going to a friend of mine’s place, upstate. I was in the service with him and we’ve kept in touch for years. When he got out he bought a farm - a fish farm; he raises trout and sells them. He has a big pond - I guess you could almost call it a lake; he stocks fish in there and charges people to fish. You don’t need a license because it’s not public waters. And, he supplies the rod, the reel and all the fishing stuff, too.”

“How much does it cost?”

“For me and you, free. I’ve known Larry for thirty years - I just bring him a case of beer. What do you think? “

“Is Hal going?” asks Jack.

“Can’t - he’s got some stuff he’s gotta do.”

“Well, it sounds like a good time - I’ll be like a kid again! Sure, sign me up, I’ll go. What time?”

“I’ll pick you up at about eight-thirty; it’ll take around an hour to get there. Just gotta hope for good weather - it’s supposed to be nice. Bring a couple of extra cigars,” Petey concludes: “Larry’s a cigar guy.”

When Petey leaves, Jack goes back upstairs, stopping to check the closet on the way.

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The next morning, the horn blows at eight-thirty, sharp.

It is attached to an old, beat-up jalopy - about a ninety-two - with a missing hubcap and a dent in the front fender. The interior is just as dilapidated, the seats torn and coffee-stained. The backseat is covered with piles of old, faded newspapers, used plastic cups and

sundry pieces of old and ripped clothing.

Jack opens the door and Petey points to the newspapers lying on the passenger's seat: "Throw those papers in the back with the rest and hop in."

Jack picks up the newspapers and throws them on top of the piles in the backseat, then slides into the passenger's seat. "What's all that shit in the back, there?"

"I gotta get to cleanin' it up, but I can't seem to do it."

"How's that?" asks Jack.

"I guess it's the way I was raised - my mother came straight out of the Depression; they never threw anything away and I suppose it just rubbed off on me. But, I'll get to it someday. Anyway, I got the beer in the trunk," Petey adds. "Away we go!"

"Where'd you get this?"

"My daughter's kid - my granddaughter. She went to college in it, then, when she graduated, like all the kids today, first thing she does is get a new car. So, I got this.

Looks like shit, but runs good. Good for around here, too
- I mean, who's gonna steal it?"

They ride for about an hour. The car radio doesn't work and idle banter flows back and forth for the entire trip. After a while, a faded billboard appears in the distance:

"LARRY'S FISHIN' HOLE - NO LICENSE REQUIRED".

Petey turns down the long, dusty, rutted road, by the sign and they bounce their way down the lane, towards the dilapidated house at the end of it. Another sign by the house reads:

"YOU ARE AT LARRY'S - FISH ARE THERE"; a big, red arrow is pointing towards the lake at the back. Petey pulls up in front of the run-down house and they get out.

The front door opens and out steps an unshaven Larry; his upper lip is covered with an unkempt mustache and he is sporting grey stubble across a square

chin. His smile makes it apparent that most of his teeth are missing, except for a few uppers and lowers in the front.

“What do we got here? Two fishin’ city slickers?” he jests, grasping Petey’s hand.

Larry speaks in a soft, gravelly, drawn-out, stage-whispering voice as if he has to pry every word, one at a time, from his throat. His voice’s pattern and tone give an air of creepiness to everything he says, no matter how mundane it might be.

“How ya been, Petey?” he asks. “Ya look okay. Ain’t seen ya since last year.”

“Doin’ good, Larry, doin’ good. This is Jack, a buddy of mine, from around the corner.”

Jack reaches out and shakes Larry’s burly, callused hand.

“Got the beer?” Larry checks.

“Sure!” Petey answers quickly; “In the trunk, with a bag of ice on it, like usual.” He gets the beer and they all

go inside.

The house is a shack, consisting of three rooms. The living room, in which they are now seated, houses two old, overstuffed chairs and a sofa, all of which are covered with dog hair. A crack in the ceiling is covered with duct tape and several pieces of fly-paper hang from it, looking as if they might fall at any moment, under the weight of the insects entangled. The floor is covered with faded, worn linoleum and a small kerosene heater is mounted against one wall. Off to the side is a dingy kitchen, its sink piled high with dirty dishes.

“Rusty! Get the fuck off the sofa!” Larry orders.

Startled by the command, the red, scruffy mongrel jumps from the stain-covered sofa and scurries to a pillow in the corner of the room.

“Grab one of the beers and sit down. Let’s talk a bit and then we’ll get to some fishin’.” Larry pops open the beer can, adding in his gravelly voice: “How’s things down by you? Just as shitty as here, I suppose.”

“Probably worse,” answers Jack: “at least here you don’t have street gangs.”

“Street gangs? We don’t even have *streets!*” Larry replies, with a laugh, as he reaches for another beer. “So, what’s with these gangs?”

Petey silently glances at Jack.

“Go ahead, Petey - tell him what happened to you the other day, down at the bank.”

Hesitatingly, Petey begins the story of how he was forced to pay the ‘Firemen’ and how the entire neighborhood is slowly being overrun by the young thugs.

“That’s some shit!” Larry responds, with disgust. “How do you let ‘em get away with that? Maybe you gotta get yourself a gun - I got one right here I’ll loan ya.” He points to a twelve-gauge, standing in the far corner. “I know you’re pretty good with it, Petey - I saw you in ‘Nam, shootin’ them gooks like tin cans off a fence post; you know how to handle yourself.”

He stands up, goes to the corner and gets the gun, which he brings over and hands to Petey.

“What about you, Jack?” he offers; “I got one you can use, too, if you want it.”

“It’s not that simple, Larry,” replies Jack: “there’s dozens of them and they pretty much run the neighborhood. You can’t just go around shooting them; if you threaten them, you’re going to have to lock every door, every window and never leave the house, or you’ll be a dead man. There’s not too much you can do, with or without a gun.”

“I suppose you’re right. But, myself, I couldn’t be livin’ that way - I’d have ta fight back, somehow. Livin’ in fear all the time and kissin’ these bastards’ asses, ain’t no way to live... not for me, anyway.” Larry chides: “Knowin’ you the way I do, Petey, I’m kinda surprised that you’re takin’ all this shit lyin’ down - I remember you bein’ an awful lot tougher than that.”

“Sure, Larry,” snaps Petey; “I was an awful lot

younger, too!"

"Ain't no excuse! Just because you got older, don't mean you gotta suck down all that shit and live in fear all the time.

"Well, you guys think about it - if you want those guns, they're right here for yas. And, if you need my help, I'll even come down and give ya a hand at teachin' these pricks a lesson - just gimme a call." With that, Larry pulls a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and lights up.

"Now, let's do some fishin'," he concludes; "grab those poles over there."

They leave the house and walk to the lake, passing several large ponds which teem with fish. With every step, they take the fish hurry to the bank alongside them.

"Look at these guys," Jack comments as they walk; "they look like piranha without the teeth. There's hundreds of them!"

"They think they're getting fed," Larry explains;

“every time you come near the pond they think it’s dinner time.”

“What do you feed them?”

“Us’ta be liver, but that got kinda expensive and messy, so, now I use commercial food - dried stuff; it’s a lot cleaner and cheaper. But, they’ll eat anything you throw in there.”

With that, Larry throws his cigarette butt into the pond. The water starts to churn, as dozens of fish rush toward the tasty morsel and instantly devour it. “See what I mean?”

He points to a roadway, branching to the left: “Here, we gotta go this way.”

Jack points out a series of small holes, burrowed into the bank, on the other side of the pond: “What’re all those holes over there?”

“Rats.”

“Rats!?”

“Yeah, there are lots of rats livin’ by the ponds - they

survive on the food that lands on the bank when I feed the fish. If I come back an hour later, there ain't a scrap nowhere - the rats get it all clean as could be."

They walk toward another pond and Larry points out a diverging path, then a chipper, alongside a pile of wood chips. "It's shorter the other way, but I got all my equipment blocking the other road - I'm tryin' to clean the brush away from the bank over there, so there's more fishin' room. That reminds me: I gotta call Ted - whenever I get a big pile, he comes down and picks 'em up."

"What's he do with them?" asks Petey.

"Don't know, really - landscaping, I think; I know his son's in that business. I don't really care what he does with 'em, as long as he gets 'em out of here."

"Why don't you feed them to the fish?" Jack adds, with a laugh.

"Don't ya think I haven't thought about it?" replies Larry, with a grin.

*

The ride home from Larry's sure seems longer than the ride up.

All in all, it was a great day - Jack caught seven fish and Petey six, now in the trunk, packed in the ice brought up with the beer.

"Wonder if I remember how to cook them," Jack comments.

"Nothin' to it," replies Petey: "Larry already cleaned and filleted them for us - all you gotta do is put some butter in the pan and fry 'em up and there you have it: a great fish dinner."

"Yeah, Larry was a cool guy," Jack comments; "kinda rustic, but cool."

"Sure is - he'd do anything to help ya. You know, when he was talkin' about the guns and comin' down to help out, he wasn't just shittin' - he'd do it. I was with

him in 'Nam; one time he got into it with three guys - they beat the livin' shit out of him. Two days later, he was back with a bat - he took on all three again and this time gave all three a good old ass-kickin'. Larry never was into takin' a lot of shit from anybody - he didn't care who, what or where; he wasn't about to suck it down and he hasn't changed a bit."

"What's with that big fuckin' scar on his cheek?"

"He got shot by a Cong, right through the cheek - the bullet went in one side and out the other, blasting out most of his back teeth on the way through. The way he tells it, he just spat 'em out and kept on shootin'! Knowin' Larry the way I do, it's most probably true," Petey says, with certainty.

The sun is just going down when they arrive home.

As Petey drops Jack off in front of his apartment, there is a small crowd, milling around outside the building; a cop car and an ambulance are sitting across the street, their lights flashing.

Jack's heart sinks.

"Somebody probably died," Petey remarks, "and they're probably pickin' up the body. When you got a lotta old people livin' here, ya gotta expect it; happens all the time."

Jack stares straight ahead, at the scene before him; he barely hears Petey's comment. *Jesus Christ! I bet they found the bag!*

Panic flashes through his mind, as he gets out of the car.

"Jack, here's Larry's phone number," Petey reminds him; "you asked me for it, before."

As Petey hands him a scrap of paper, Jack stuffs it into his pocket, closing the car's door. "Yeah, thanks, Petey," he replies, in a hollow, entrancing voice, still staring at the crowd in front of his building.

"Oh, Jack! Get your fish out of the trunk." Petey pops the deck lid.

"Oh, yeah, sure," Jack says, in a slow, distracted

monotone. "Thanks."

He walks to the rear of the car, in zombie-like fashion, still staring, while straining to see if the lights are on in Mrs. Murray's apartment. He takes out the fish and walks slowly towards the building.

"What's going on?" he asks one of the bystanders.

"I think it's an old lady."

"What about the old lady?"

"I think she had a heart attack - they found her in the hallway. Here, they're bringing her out now."

Two men are carefully carrying a gurney, bearing Mrs. Murray, down the stairs and out of the front doorway. Jack goes over to the ambulance and awaits their arrival.

"Mrs. Murray, what happened?" he asks her, as they start to put her into the ambulance.

"I don't know Jack - I just passed out and the next thing I knew, these men were here. They said I had a heart attack, but I don't really remember."

“Excuse me, Sir - we’ve got to get her to the hospital.” The EMTs slide the gurney into the back of the vehicle.

“How is she?” Jack asks, anxiously.

“We think she’s going to be okay,” replies one of the men, “but, that’s for the doctors to decide.”

And, with that, they shut the ambulance door and drive away.

“Thank God,” he mutters, sighing in relief.

Of course, he doesn’t want to see the old lady having suffered a heart attack, but that is certainly better than the body having been found.

He has to get rid of it! Another incident like this and he’ll be having a heart attack himself!

Chapter 6

"House Cleaning"

He walks up the stairs, into the old lady's apartment and hesitantly opens the closet door. It is still there, just as it was the last time and the time before that and the time before that...

He goes up to his apartment, takes out the frying pan and starts cooking the fish. It is good - a welcome change from frozen dinners and microwave heat-ups. Then, he goes into his bedroom. Some of her things are on the dresser and he carefully pushes them aside; at least, tonight, he'll be back in his own bed - maybe this will give him a better night's sleep.

He reaches into his pocket to take out his wallet and the crumpled piece of paper with Larry's number on it falls to the floor. He picks it up, unfolds it and carries it over to the lamp; the writing is faint but legible. He

flattens out the scrap, before returning it to his wallet.

He undresses and falls onto the bed, where he lays there, staring at the ceiling.

Thinking

“What a sick thought,” he mumbles to himself. Then he compliments himself: “Sick, but probably the best idea I’ve had yet.”

Got to do something, he thinks; can’t keep going down to the closet every other minute, hoping it will just disappear.

He sits up in bed, then hesitates for a while. He reaches for his wallet and again takes out the paper scrap featuring Larry’s number.

Would Larry really go for it? he wonders.

He said he would do whatever he had to, to help out – and, this would be a *big* help, for sure. Hopefully, not *too* big for him!

“Okay - what the hell!” *The worst that could happen is he won’t do it.*

Jack reaches for the phone and begins dialing. As he

is about to push the final button, he shuts it off.

What am I going to say when Larry answers? "Larry, I got this body in the downstairs closet and I want your help to get rid of it." Is that it?

There must be a subtler way of putting it.

"Larry, you said you would help out if we needed you."
Yeah, that's a little better. I'll start that way.

He redials the number.

"Hello," answers Larry.

"Hello, Larry, this is Jack."

"What's the matter?" Larry replies; "Ya forget something, or ya wanta come back tomorrow for some more fishin'?"

"No, Larry - that's not really it. Remember this morning, when we were talking about our problem here, with this gang and you said you'd help out if you could? Did you really mean it?"

"I don't never say nothin' I don't really mean unless I'm jokin' and that wasn't no joke this morning," Larry says sternly; "I hate to see anybody gettin' abused by

those shitbags, especially when they're friends of mine."

"Well," Jack continues, "I got this problem."

The conversation goes on for some ten minutes until Larry concludes: "Okay, then, I'll see you tomorrow, if you can get Petey to drive you back up. Call me before you come, so I can be sure I don't have any customers hangin' around and I can get everything ready."

"Thanks again, Larry. See ya tomorrow."

Jack hangs up the phone and immediately dials Petey; "Petey, this is Jack. Can you do me a favor tomorrow? Well, really *two* favors?"

"Sure, Jack. What is it?"

"First, I need you to drive down to the store on Hastings Street, where they sell those big-screen TVs and get an empty box from one of them - they throw them out around the back of the store. Get a big one, but be sure that it will fit in your trunk - it'll be okay if it hangs out a little. Bring it over here tomorrow morning. Oh and get some cord from the hardware store, to tie it down, too. I

want to get rid of an old TV, for the lady downstairs - it plays good, but her son just gave her a new one, so she wants to get rid of it.

“I’m gonna take it up to Larry - I talked to him about it when we were up there yesterday and he said he’d be glad to have it. I just called him to make sure and he still wants it. I want you to help me carry it out of here. It’s in nice shape and I want to put it in the box so it doesn’t get all scratched up on the way to Larry’s. What do you think?”

“Sure Jack, I’ll be over tomorrow morning, as soon as I’ve got the box.”

The next morning, Jack arises early, continually peeking out the front window, eager for Petey’s arrival. When he finally pulls up, Jack races down the stairs, to meet him at the curb.

“Is this what you wanted?” Petey points to the box, protruding from the trunk of the car.

“Yeah, perfect! Petey, give me some of those

newspapers in your back seat there - I can use them to pack around the TV, so it doesn't bounce all over, on the way up."

Jack takes the papers, which he tucks under his arm. He then reaches into his pocket and pulls out a five-dollar bill; "Listen, go over to the Dunkin Donuts on Haynes Street and get us some coffee and donuts for the ride up to Larry's. And, Petey, make sure you get *Dunkin Donuts* coffee - that other stuff tastes like piss."

"Okay. Don't ya need help with the TV?" Petey questions.

"Yeah, only to get it down the stairs - I'll go and load it into the box while you get the coffee."

Jack lifts the empty box out of the car's trunk, closing the deck lid and carries it up to the second floor, into Mrs. Murray's bedroom.

He knows Petey will be gone for at least twenty minutes or so - he purposely sent him to the Dunkin Donuts he knows is about fifteen blocks away.

Jack lays the box on its side, then opens the closet door, dragging out the bag. He rolls it into the box and it fits perfectly. Then, he tilts the box upright and stuffs wads of newspaper around the bag, to keep it in place, before packing the top tightly with paper and closing the lid. Finally, he binds the box with several loops of heavy packaging tape, which he bought the day before.

When it is sealed, he drags the box into the hallway, where he awaits Petey's return.

Petey takes just about the time expected: twenty minutes. Upon seeing him, Jack opens the window and calls out, in a low voice: "Come on up."

Together, they slide the box out of the apartment, to the top of the stairs. "Let's get it down these stairs and into the car," says Jack; "I'll take the bottom."

"Goddamn!" remarks Petey, as they lift the box and Jack backs slowly towards the steps; "This is some heavy TV."

"Yeah - they don't make 'em like they used to,"

replies Jack; “the old ones, like this, were heavy, alright.”

They jockey the box carefully down the stairwell and, eventually, into the trunk of the car.

“Let’s tie it in real good,” Jack suggests. “We got to tie the trunk lid down tight, too.”

So, having secured the box and the lid, they climb into the car, then drive into the morning mist and head to Larry’s.

Chapter 7

"A Done Deed"

Larry takes some beer from the fridge and they go to sit out on his front porch, in the cool evening air.

No one speaks for a long time and the ear-ringing silence is broken only by the sound of a distant train whistle.

"About six o'clock," announces Larry, turning his head in the whistle's direction. "She comes through here every night about now."

The silence continues, as they all sit, motionlessly, pondering their grisly act.

Suddenly, Larry looks up, spying a cloud of dust approaching up the lane. "What the hell is that!?" he exclaims; "I thought I'd put up the 'closed' sign!"

"And, who would wanta fish at this time of night?" Petey stutters, nervously.

A police car is now coming into view.

“What the hell!?” exclaims Jack, his heart pounding in his throat.

They watch, as the car pulls up and stops before them. Larry squints in the dim light, trying to peer into the window.

Finally, the door opens and Tim steps out. “How’s it going?”

“Not bad,” replies Larry, in the calmest voice he can muster.

“I saw that ‘closed’ sign out front; are you gonna be closed tomorrow, too?” Tim asks; “I wanted to bring my kid over to do some fishing.”

“No, back in business tomorrow,” replies Larry.

Tim then turns towards Jack and Petey; “How’d you guys make out here with that TV? It was just about hanging out of the trunk and I wasn’t sure if you would make down this road here, without it falling out.”

“Yeah, we made it down okay,” replies Jack.

“How’s it workin’? Reception’s not too good around here, ya know?”

“Ain’t hooked it up yet,” Larry answers, immediately. “Want a beer, Tim?” he adds, in an attempt to deflect further conversation away from the “TV”.

“Not when I’m drivin’ the car here,” he points to the cruiser, “but, thanks anyway. I’ll see you tomorrow, then. So long, boys - it was nice seeing you again. Have a safe one home.”

With that, he gets back in the car. They all exhale in unison, as Tim pulls away.

*

It is a long ride home.

Not much is said, except for Petey telling Jack that he doesn’t hold any grudges for being tricked. As for Jack, he only feels a perverse sense of satisfaction.

One less smartass thug, he thinks, silently. *Besides,*

nobody really killed anyone, anyway - it was an accident. Even if the guy had been killed on purpose, so what!?! A prick that no doubt deserved it!

*

Jack strolls out of his building's front door and heads for his usual daily smoke on the bench; once there, he sits and lights the cigar, with several long, slow draws.

It has been a week since the morbid task was committed. Since then, Mrs. Murray has returned home from the hospital and is doing well - the doctors attributed her remarkable recovery to the medication she is taking.

Jack, however, is certain that the removal of the bag from the closet contributed significantly more to her improvement, than did the medication. He told her as soon as she arrived home that the bag and its contents had been removed - she never even asked how, where or

when; he certainly never would have told her the gruesome details, even had she done so. Her only measurable response was overwhelming relief.

He's also spoken to both Petey and Hal, several times since, small-talk, bench talk; neither he nor Petey said a word to Hal about their trip to Larry's.

"Hey, Hal. How you been?" Jack asks as Hal approaches the bench.

"Not bad, not bad."

"What you hearing around the neighborhood?" asks Jack, in a casual voice, which hides his intense curiosity.

"Well, yesterday a guy in the building next to mine was tellin' me that he heard some street-talk," replies Hal.

"What do you mean: 'street-talk'?" asks Jack, eagerly.

"Stuff about that gang of young bastards - you know: the 'Firemen'."

"So, what did he hear?" asks Jack, again struggling

to contain his curiosity.

“Well, now the story’s changed and I hear a different story about the guy they say was cut up by another gang: now they say he’s nowhere to be found - he just kinda went off, into thin air... nobody knows where. And those punks seem to be thinkin’ that he took off, with pretty much all their money.”

“All their money?” Jack questions.

“Yeah, he was like a safety deposit box for the gang. He used ta carry it around with him all the time and whenever any of ‘em needed cash, he just peeled it off to them. He usta give ‘em ‘chits’ - like little pieces of paper, tellin’ ‘em how much cash each had comin’; I think he probably did it that way to keep control over them all - ya know: the guy that’s got the cash has always got the power.”

“You say he always kept the cash on him, in his pocket?” Jack reiterates, in a startled tone. “Are you sure?” Incredulity and surprise are clearly evident in his

voice.

“I’m not *sure* about any of it - I’m just tellin’ you what this guy told me.”

“How come the rest of them went for that arrangement?” Jack continues; “Why didn’t they just demand their money upfront?”

“I don’t know. I guess because the ‘Sandman’ was a pretty merciless dude - a mean bastard! He had no fuckin’ conscience, like an animal! I heard that one time he thought he got crossed by one of them and he went and cut the guy’s eye out; you probably seen him around - he’s the one that’s wearin’ the patch.

“It musta worked out good for him - that eye job musta scared the livin’ shit outta all of ‘em, ‘cause they did just exactly what they was told after that. And, they kept on lettin’ him hold all the money. Like I said, they were all scared shitless of him from then on.

“All except for one guy, who was kinda his right-hand man. But, I guess in the end he got screwed, ‘cause

the Sandman disappeared with his money, too.”

“What did you call him? ‘Sandman’?”

“Yeah. They called him ‘Sandman’, ‘cause he put a lot of guys to sleep, for keeps!” Hal answers.

“What’s the guy’s name,” asks Jack, “the one you said was his right-hand man?”

“They call him ‘DS’ - stands for ‘Deuce of Spades’ because he’s number two and he’s good at usin’ a spade... to put people in the ground, that is.”

“Who’s the guy that’s telling you all of this, anyway?” asks Jack; “What’s his name?”

“Like I told ya: he’s a guy that lives in the building next to mine - his name is Frank; I don’t know his last name. I was takin’ the garbage out yesterday and I happened to meet him. He had a ‘Nam tattoo,” Hal explains; “I saw it and started talkin’ to him. He was over there, too, in the Delta. He even got a couple of holes in his leg, for souvenirs.”

“How does he know all this shit about the FM?”

“He used to go almost every day to ‘The Box’... you know: ‘The Lunch Box’ - that little divey place on Hudson Street. He usta go about ten o’clock in the morning to get a little breakfast and, who was always in there, but a bunch of FMers? They always sit at the same table and bullshit with each other for an hour or two; he overheard it all.”

“He doesn’t go there anymore?”

“Nah - he said listenin’ to all their bullshit, day after day, was gettin’ him so pissed off that he was beginnin’ to get afraid that he’d start sayin’ something. He thought maybe he couldn’t control himself anymore and that wouldn’t work out too good for him if ya know what I mean. So, he just decided to stay away.

“They never pay - they always tell Charlie, the owner, to put it on their tab, but, of course, they never pay the tab. It really pisses Charlie off, but, what can he do about it?”

“Not much, I guess,” replies Jack, with disgust, “not

much.”

Jack takes a final drag on the remainder of his cigar stub, discards it and then walks, with Hal, back towards his building.

“Where’s Hudson Street?” he asks; “This ‘Lunch Box’?”

“About three blocks down and turn left - ya can’t miss it,” replies Hal, as they approach his house. “Just look for the place with windows that haven’t been washed in years.”

Chapter 8

"Ponder And Deliberate"

Jack gets home and immediately calls Larry.

"Larry, it's Jack - I had to call you. You know that TV we brought up the other day - the one we had to get rid of because it was broken? Remember the stuff we burned up afterwards?"

"Sure, Jack, what about it?" answers Larry.

"Well, I've come to find out there was a shitload of money in there - we didn't even look! I guess we were in such a hurry to do what we had to do that we never even thought of it."

"Man, what a hump!" replies Larry. "Next time, we'll make goddamn sure we take a real good look."

"Next time!?" exclaims Jack.

"There's always more of 'em, ain't there?" Larry replies, soberly. "I know a lot about rats: for every one ya

kill, there's always a dozen more, down in the holes.

"You're not gonna keep takin' this shit, are you, Jack? You don't look like the kinda guy that's willing to be shitted on - livin' in fear all the time."

"They haven't bothered me yet - I got no problem with them," replies Jack; "I don't like what they're doing, but they're not bothering me."

"Trust me: they will, they will! And, when they do, you'll get sick of it real quick and I'll be gettin' a call about some more free food for my boys. I'll be waitin' by the phone."

With that, Larry hangs up.

*

Jack peers through the hazy window of The Lunch Box, then goes inside.

The well-worn, faded and chipped Formica counter stands before a row of old-style circular stools, each

covered with red vinyl, which is creased with age; some are torn, whilst others are patched up with grey duct tape - only three or four of the seats remain unblemished.

Adjacent to the aisle, along the opposite wall to the row of stools, are several booths, also clearly marred and worn with age; each is clad with the same faded red vinyl as the stool and many are patched up with the same grey tape. The tables are of the same faded and chipped Formica as the counter.

The air is filled with the smell of recently fried bacon, mixed with the odor of burnt coffee. Charlie - the owner and cook - stands behind the counter, wearing a food-stained apron. He is a large man in his fifties, with a protruding belly and slicked back oily hair.

Jack walks towards a stool, at the end of the row, nearest the entrance to the kitchen. His eyes are fixed on four gang members, seated in a booth, near the rear of the shop - they all appear just as Frank's description to Hal.

Jack spies DS in an instant - he is easy to pick out,

with a sparkling gold nose-ring dangling below his broad nostrils and a snarly grin, which raises his thin upper lip, revealing a gleaming gold incisor. He speaks in a deep, raspy, drawn-out voice.

All four of the men are wearing black shirts, the left shoulders of each bearing an embroidered, oval-shaped patch: the letters "FM", in black and orange, surrounded by red and yellow flames. Two of them wear olive-grey, military-style hats, also featuring the orange flame patch above their tattered brims.

Jack sits at the counter, just within earshot of their conversation and orders a coffee. Slowly sipping, he listens intently; just as Hal had said, they banter back and forth, in loud, boisterous voices.

After twenty minutes or so, he hears one of them call to Charlie: "Put it on my tab, Charlie boy - I'm buyin' today."

The announcement is from DS; with a laugh, they all get up and leave.

“Those bastards! Every goddamn day - same shit!” blurts Charlie, as the door slams behind them. He angrily smacks his spatula down on the grill; “Goddamn it!”

“What’s the problem?” Jack asks him, naively.

“Those fuckin’ bums come in here every day, order up breakfast and never pay a dime!”

“But, didn’t he just say to put it on his tab?” replies Jack, again in an innocent tone.

“Are you shittin’ me? ‘Tab’? There’s no ‘tab’! The only tab would be my hospital bill if I tried to collect.”

“Why not call the cops?” asks Jack, again feigning naiveté.

“Cops!? They’re more afraid of those punks than I am!” Charlie explains angrily. “Even if I did call ‘em, the next thing would be my place getting burned out! Did you see the ‘FM’ tats on the back of their hands and on their necks? They call themselves the ‘Firemen’ - why do you think? It’s sure not because they put fires out!”

“It’s a bitch!” answers Jack, in a sympathetic voice.

With that, he leaves The Lunch Box and walks home.

Chapter 9

"Talk Is Cheap"

It is ten o'clock at night when Jack hears a loud banging on his apartment door. He goes over and looks through the peephole.

There are three thugs outside, all of which he recognizes from The Lunch Box.

"Open the door!" demands one.

"Open the door, or we'll huff and we'll puff and we'll blow your house down," announces the second, with a snicker.

"What do you want?" Jack shouts through the closed door.

"What the fuck do you think we want? We want to get in! Open the fuckin' door!"

Jack slowly opens the door a crack and they force their way in, breaking the chain latch off the door jamb.

“That’s a boy!

“We’re here doin’ some charity work: we’re collectin’ for a community group called ‘The Firemen’s Fund’; I’m sure you’ve heard about some of the apartment fires here in the neighborhood, haven’t you? It’s a goddamn shame, isn’t it?”

Jack says nothing.

“I guess you heard about the one over on Hayes Street and the one on Aryers? If those people woulda had us on the job, I bet those fires never woulda happened - what do ya think?”

Jack is again silent.

“What we do is we make sure that kinda thing doesn’t happen to *you*. Now, it’s hard to keep this kinda service going without support and we’re here to ask for your contribution; we suggest - *strongly* suggest - a fifty dollar per month donation.”

Jack still says nothing.

“Let’s quit the bullshit!” shouts the other thug,

impatiently; "Give up the fifty bucks and ya don't get burned out!"

Jack slowly reaches into his pocket and hands them forty dollars, still silent.

"You're light, my man: I said fifty."

"It's all I've got now," Jack replies.

There is a brief silence, as all three of them glare at Jack. Then, one speaks: "Okay, but we'll be back next month and it'll be sixty bucks - that'll give ya a whole month to save up."

They leave; as they move down the hall, Jack closes his door and slumps into a chair. He can hear them pounding on the next apartment's front door.

"What a bitch!" he mumbles to himself.

*

The next morning, Jack is seated on his usual bench, in front of the apartment building, when he sees Hal

approaching - he has a splint and bandage on his finger and is still limping.

Hal holds his hand by his side, away from Jack, in a weak attempt to hide it. Jack immediately spots it, however, and proceeds to slowly pry information out of his reluctant associate.

“Hey, man, what the hell happened to you? What happened to your hand!?”

“Oh, that... I got my finger busted.”

“Well, yeah... but, how?”

“Got it slammed in a door - broke the little one real good.”

“Slammed in a door? How’d you do that?”

“Don’t make no difference how,” Hal replies, reluctantly, “it just got smashed!”

“You seem kinda jittery, Hal. What’s the problem?”

“No problem, Jack. Really - no problem!”

“How long have I known you, Hal?” asks Jack, solemnly.

“Don’t know. I guess, pretty much, ever since I moved here.”

“And, how much time do you figure we spend on this bench every week?”

“I suppose a couple of hours a day, except in bad weather.”

“I’m not a great math guy, but I’d say that adds up to about a shitload of hours. What do you think?”

“Probably right,” agrees Hal.

“I think, then, we can pretty much tell when the other one of us isn’t tellin’ the whole truth.”

“Suppose so,” Hal again agrees, reluctantly.

“So, what happened to the hand?”

Hal hesitates again, but then speaks: “It happened last night.”

He proceeds to explain:

Some of the gang were outside, pounding on his door, so Hal got up from his seat. There were several empty beer bottles on the table in front of him and Hal

was, by now, unsteady, still with a beer in his hand, as he went to the door and looked through the peephole.

One of the men shouted: "We're collectin' for charity. Open the door!"

Slurring his words, Hal shouted back at them: "Fuck you, you scumbags! You're not gettin' a goddamn dime! Now, get outta here!"

"If ya know what's good for you, you'll open the fuckin' door!"

"Blow me!" Hal yelled, stumbling back from the door, as he started walking away.

Suddenly, the door was broken open and they streamed in. They pushed Hal into the bathroom and backward into the bathtub. As he lay on his back in the tub, one of the thugs was grasping him by his shirt collar, while another pulled Hal's wallet out of his pocket, taking out whatever money was in it.

Suddenly, DS appeared in the bathroom's doorway. "What the fuck is goin' on with this guy?" he shouted.

“He ain’t exactly cooperating with the program.”

DS stepped into the bathroom. “We can’t be goin’ through this every time - if it gets out, we’re gonna have trouble with all the others, too. Get him over here.”

They pulled Hal out of the bathtub and over to the bathroom’s door, as he vainly struggled. There, DS grabbed hold of Hal’s hand, forcing his little finger into the crack between the door and the jamb, close to one of the hinges. Holding the hand there, as Hal continued to wriggle and writhe, DS yelled: “Okay, let her go.”

One of the thugs slammed the door closed, crushing Hal’s finger and the old man screamed. As they released him, he fell to the floor, clutching his hand.

The group turned to leave; on the way out, DS stopped in the doorway, yelling back at him: “Next time it’ll be your dick!”

Hal was left writhing in pain on the bathroom floor.

As he finishes his explanation, Hal sits in momentary silence, his head bowed.

“Holy shit! What did you do then?” asks Jack.

“What could I do? I packed my hand in ice and walked to the hospital ER, down on Bradley. They set my finger and gave me some pain pills.”

There is a long silence before Jack speaks: “‘Ponder and deliberate before you make a move’.”

“What?” questions Hal.

“‘Sun Tzu - The Art of War’. It was written by an ancient Chinese warlord, about twenty-five hundred years ago. It means think before you act and you will succeed - we have to think about what we’re gonna do.”

“What do you mean ‘what we’re gonna do’?”

“You don’t really think we can just sit around and let this kinda shit keep happening over and over, do you?” replies Jack.

“Well, what are we gonna do about it?”

“That’s what I just said: ‘ponder and deliberate before you act’; we have to decide how to stop this and soon,” Jack answers. “Something else Sun Tzu said was:

'In order to kill the enemy, our men must be roused to anger'. I know *I'm* pretty pissed off and I'm sure you are, too."

Hal says: "Then I guess all we gotta do is the 'ponder and deliberate' part. Where did you get all this Chinese stuff from?"

"When I was in the service, I had this drill sergeant - he loved 'The Art of War'; he used to carry quotes from it in his shirt pocket and he'd say them every day. He made us learn them by heart. Every day we'd get a new quote and the next day he'd call guys at random and ask them about it - if you didn't know the answer, you were in for some heavy ball-bustin'! When I was going through this, I thought it was a bunch of bullshit - but turned out lots of times later on these words served me well.

"This problem we've got here is *war* and Sun Tzu can help us win it. Bring Petey over with you tomorrow."

"Sure thing, Jack," Hal replies and they leave the

bench.

As Jack is walking upstairs to his apartment, he notices Mrs. Murray's door is open, a piece of duct tape hanging from it.

He cracks it open a little and stealthily whispers into the apartment: "Mrs. Murray? Ellen?"

"Jack, is that you?" she answers.

"Yes. I saw that your door was open - are you feeling alright?"

"I'm okay - I just gotta take these pills every day and they said I'd be okay." She picks up a bottle of pills from the table, holding it up for Jack to see - the label reads: "Digitalis, 3mg".

"Why'd you leave your door open?"

"I called the super about the door, must be a dozen times - he keeps saying that he's going to fix it, but he never shows up. I usually close it with a piece of duct tape, but I guess it just came loose again."

She pauses for a moment, then adds: "I've wanted to

talk to you, but I didn't want to make trouble for you again."

"Talk about what?"

"Last night - those thugs came back to my door and scared me out of fifty dollars - a donation to their 'Firemen Fund'. I know it was a shakedown, but I didn't even argue - I was so scared, especially after what happened before, I just gave them the money. They said they'll be back next month, for more. I didn't know what else to do. Did I do the right thing, Jack?"

"Yes - you did the only thing that you could do," Jack replies, consolingly.

"What should I do when they come back?"

"I think you'll have to pay them again until we can straighten all this out."

"What if I don't have the money?"

"Come see me before they are due and I'll try to help you out as best I can."

*

The next morning, Jack is sitting at the counter in The Lunch Box. He points to his cup; "Charlie, give me a little more."

As Charlie pours, Jack inquires: "Have those bums who usually sit at that table been here already?"

Finished filling Jack's cup, Charlie walks around to the table in the gang's booth, which he starts to wipe down, as he answers: "Yeah - they always show up about ten and leave about eleven or twelve; they only just left. Not only do they not pay the bill, they always leave a mess and spill shit all over the place! Don't even put the lid back on the sugar. Look at this." Charlie points to an empty coffee cup on the table and Jack turns on his stool to look.

"That DS guy uses half the table's sugar and most of it just sits on the bottom of the cup, anyway," Charlie explains, with disgust.

“You mean they come here every day?”

“Sure do, like clockwork - come here, steal breakfast from me, then go home, get high, sleep it off and be ready for their ‘night-ride’, as they call it.”

Jack finishes his coffee and stands, preparing to leave; “See ya tomorrow, Charlie.”

“Guess you’re a regular now, huh, Jack?”

Jack answers, with a smile: “I like your coffee. And even better still, I pay the tab.”

Jack leaves, as Charlie continues cleaning up.

Chapter 10

"Time For Talk Is Over"

Jack is in the stairway, approaching Mrs. Murray's door; it is still taped shut.

He cracks the door and softly whispers inside: "Anybody home?"

There is no answer and he softly calls out again: "Mrs. Murray?"

He steps into the apartment. It is empty, except for the cat, cowering in the corner, hissing at him. Jack walks into the kitchen and quickly looks around.

He spies the medicine bottle on the counter - the one she had shown him. He stares at it for a while, then carefully opens the bottle, to find it nearly full. Tipping several of the pills out, he puts them into his pocket, before replacing the bottle on the counter, exactly as he had found it.

Then, he leaves the apartment, sticking the tape back onto the door.

*

Hal and Petey are talking, as usual, while Jack is puffing away on his cigar, looking straight ahead, without really paying attention to either.

Suddenly, he stops smoking and turns to Petey; "Ever kill anybody, Petey?"

Petey is startled by Jack's question, from out of the blue. He hesitates for a moment, before replying: "You know I did: Larry told you about me in 'Nam."

"What did you think, when you did it?"

"I didn't think - just did it; it's what I was there for: you kill them or they'll kill you. I never killed anybody up close and personal - it was always some guy off in the distance; I never saw the look in his eyes when he got shot... never heard him scream - none of that. It was

kinda like being at the boardwalk, except the targets were shootin' back at ya."

"How did it make you feel?" Jack continues to subtly question him. "Afterwards, I mean."

"Not too good. I felt bad for those guys, later - they were forced into the whole thing, just like me. But, like I said before, it was them or me - I had to do what I had to do."

"Your back was against the wall and there was no other way out, right?"

"Yeah, Jack, that's right."

"What about you, Hal?"

"Never killed nobody. Killed a dog once - *my* dog. I loved that Sammy - he was almost human to me. That was about the closest I ever come to killin' a person."

"How come you killed him?"

Hal hesitates, then begins to explain: "He got real sick and, in those days, back in my town, the only sick animals that ever saw a vet was the ones that were worth

money, like farm stock - pets, like dogs and cats, they got the bullet. He was my dog, so I had the job of shootin' him."

Hal continues to explain how, as a child, he sat on an old, rickety, wooden chair, for hours, with tears streaming down his face, a rifle across his lap and his dog lying by his side. Finally, he summoned the strength to stand up and slowly walked out the door, his dog following; within seconds, the shot had rung out and it was done.

"I felt terrible about it for weeks after. But, kinda like Petey, in 'Nam, it was my job and I had ta do it."

After a few seconds, Hal lifts his bowed head and Jack speaks: "Do you think you could ever kill a person?"

Hal answers, pensively: "Maybe, if I had to, but I'm not real sure - I don't think anybody that's never done it can really say; they might say: 'Oh yeah, sure', but, when the time comes, it might be a whole different story."

"You're right," replies Jack.

“What about you, Jack?” Petey asks.

“Don’t know if I could; I’d like to think I’d be able to, if I really had to.”

“What are you gettin’ at, Jack, with all this talking about killin’?” Hal asks.

Jack pauses, before answering, emotionally: “The other day, when those bums came to my house and hustled me, I thought I could have easily killed all of them if I had the chance. Then, when I saw you yesterday, Hal and you told me what they did to you, I knew I could and I would if I had the chance. I’m not talking about killing *people* here: I’m talking about exterminating rats and cockroaches - I look at it as being just like *Terminix* or *Roto-Rooter*, cleaning out the bugs and sewer rats.” He pauses again, then continues: “I guess I’m kinda letting my imagination run away with me.”

“And, I guess you’re trying to find out if Hal and me would go along with you, if you did decide to do

something, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Jack confesses.

"Count me out," Hal declares: "I can't be murderin' nobody."

"To be honest, I don't know if I could either, in spite of all my bullshit," Jack adds. "Probably, when it came right down to it, I wouldn't be able to."

"Guess we're just gonna have to go on living like animals then and get used to the Firemen being the masters and us being the ass-lickin' dogs," Hal surmises, with a sigh. But, after a pause, he continues once again: "Even if we did wanta do it, how could we, anyway?"

"Without getting caught, or getting ourselves killed?" adds Petey.

"I'm not sure, but I have some ideas," Jack says. "Did you ever kill a snake, Hal?"

"I never did, but I saw a lot of 'em get killed down south, when I was a kid - cotton-mouths, ya know."

"How'd they do it? Do ya remember?"

“Yeah, they used to cut the head right off. They used to say that if ya didn’t, it wouldn’t die - if you did, it would die at sundown.”

“Well, that’s kinda my idea,” Jack replies: “we got to cut the head off and then the body of the snake will die. *How* we cut it off is the problem.”

“What do you mean: ‘cut the head off’?”

“I mean: we get rid of the boss-man.”

“Yeah, but that didn’t happen when Sandman disappeared - DS just stepped in and started the same old shit again, as smooth as could be.”

“Maybe this time it’s gotta be more dramatic,” Jack suggests; “something to really scare the piss outta them!”

“So, what you’re saying, Jack, is that we get rid of DS and do it so that it’s clear the others will be next if they don’t quit?”

“You got it, Petey.”

“But, how?”

“I’m not sure,” repeats Jack.

A brief silence prevails before Petey speaks: “How about we send an anonymous threat? Maybe we can disturb them - get them suspicious of each other; maybe we can get them at each other’s throats. I’m not sure if it’ll work, but I think we should give it a try before we start planning to kill anybody.”

Jack responds, with a sigh: “I don’t think it’ll mean a damn thing, but I’m willing to try if that’s what you guys want to do. Maybe I’m wrong: maybe it’ll work.”

*

The next morning, Jack is in The Lunch Box, drinking his coffee at the counter, as Charlie is drying glasses.

He watches, as a kid walks in, orders a soda and Charlie goes to the back room, returning with a can of Coke. He hands it to the kid, who pays and leaves.

“Hey, Charlie, how come you keep the soda cooler in the back?” Jack asks; “You have to keep going back there

to get them all the time.”

Charlie points towards the front door, where the dusty outline of where the soda case once stood is still apparent on the floor; “Used to have it in the front, over there, but kids used to run in the front door, grab a soda and run out. So, I had to move it back where they can’t do that anymore.”

Jack changes the subject: “Where are your boys today? That gang of punks?”

Charlie looks at the clock: “Oh, they’ll be here any minute; every day, around ten o’clock, without fail.”

Jack continues to sip his coffee and, within seconds, four of the Firemen walk in and go to sit at their usual booth.

As their banter becomes more boisterous, Jack gets up and leaves.

*

The following morning, Jack makes his way to the neighborhood playground.

He is wearing a fake mustache and a pair of old, black-rimmed glasses, which he bought at the dollar store the day before. His hair is greasily slicked back and he is unshaven.

He looks at his watch - it reads nine-thirty.

A boy, about ten years old, is tossing a ball against a concrete wall and catching it; Jack approaches him.

“Son, would you like to make ten dollars, doing me a favor?”

The boy immediately snaps upright, though continuing to throw and catch the ball; “Listen, old man - I’m not into gay stuff! Leave me alone!”

“No, no! That’s not what I mean! All I want you to do is take this piece of paper to The Lunch Box, down the street.”

The boy stops playing and turns to see Jack holding out the note with one hand and the ten-dollar bill in the

other.

“You sure that’s all?” the boy asks, cautiously.

“Positive,” Jack answers.

The boy stares at the money for a moment, then, warily, agrees: “Okay. What do I gotta do?” He timidly accepts the note from Jack.

“You take this note down to The Lunch Box – until you get there you keep it in your pocket. Go inside and ask the guy behind the counter for a soda; here’s the money for the soda,” Jack hands the kid two dollars. “When he goes out the back to get your soda, put this note on the first table from the back, face up and put the sugar bowl on the corner of it, so it stays there. And, be sure he doesn’t see you do it! Then, come back here and I’ll give you your money.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it, kid - ten bucks... and a free soda.”

The boy takes off, running towards The Lunch Box with the note. After a minute, he returns.

“Did it!” he says, breathlessly.

“Was there anybody in the place?” asks Jack.

“Just me and the guy.”

“And you put it on the first table like I said?”

The boy smiles proudly: “Sure did!”

“Did he see you do it?”

“Not a bit!”

Jack hands the kid the ten-dollar bill.

“Whenever you want any more notes handed out, I’ll be right here,” the boy adds, eagerly.

*

Later that morning, Jack arrives at The Lunch Box. He sees Charlie, slumped on a stool, his apron clutched in his hand and his head drooping. His hair is tussled, his face reddened and his grease-spotted shirt torn.

“Charlie, what the hell is going on?”

“Those same fuckin’ punks!”

“What happened this time?”

Charlie begins his stammered explanation: “The whole thing was strange - at ten o’clock that bunch came in, like usual and they sat at their usual booth. Suddenly, after a minute or two, DS jumped up from the booth, waving this piece of paper in his hand and yelling: ‘What’s this shit!? Where did this come from?’ Then, he came over to me and shoved it in my face. I told him I don’t know - I really didn’t know what he was talking about. I guess that wasn’t good enough, because he slapped me across the face and said: ‘Read it out, so we all can hear it - read it real good, Charlie boy’. So, I had to read it.”

“What did it say? Can you remember?”

“Yeah, I can remember most all of it - it said: ‘No more ripping off the people living in this neighborhood - this is your only warning. If you do it again, you and all of your gang will be punished. This is no bullshit! The Grey Army’.”

“Then what?” asks Jack.

“DS asked me again who wrote the note and I had to tell him all over again that I didn’t know - I really don’t! To me, it sounded like one of those old sixties groups, like the ‘Symbionese Liberation Army’, or somethin’ like that. That’s all I could tell him.”

“What did they do then?”

“They sat there and ate like usual, all the time talkin’ back and forth about that note, trying to figure out where it came from. After about an hour, they left, but, before they did, DS took the note, lit it on fire and threw it on the table and he yelled: ‘That’s what we think of that shit! When we find out who left it, we’ll show ‘em what punishment *really* is - you can be sure about that!’ Then, they all marched out and slammed the door behind them - almost knocked it off its hinges!

“Here’s the craziest thing: about fifteen minutes later, a kid comes in and starts telling me they’re going around askin’ if anybody knows anything about that

note. And, the kid asked me if I remembered him coming into the store. I told him 'no, I didn't' and the kid just said: 'good' and left."

Chapter 11

"Seek And Destroy"

Early the next morning, Jack is sleeping, when he is awakened by a pounding on his door.

He gets up, still groggy and goes across to peek through the peephole, but can barely make out the person on the other side. "Who is it?"

"It's Hal, Jack - I came to tell you what happened last night, over at my place."

Jack opens the door and lets him in.

Hal blurts out: "The Firemen showed up at each apartment last night - they had a little kid with them. They got everybody in the apartment to come to the door and asked the kid if any of them was the guy that gave him the note."

"What note?" Jack plays dumb.

"Well, it seems they got a threatening note at the

coffee shop yesterday and it was delivered by the kid. So, now, they want to know who sent the kid."

"So, then what?"

"The kid couldn't finger anybody, so they said 'fire protection' is going up by ten dollars a month for everybody, until they find out who wrote it," Hal continues. "They're going from building to building - I'm guessin' they'll be here tonight."

"I appreciate the warning. But, why did you come over at this hour to tell me?"

"I just had a gut feeling, after our talk the other day, that you should know; just a feeling... if you know what I mean."

"Sure. Thanks, Hal."

*

Later that evening, Jack is sitting in his kitchen, when he hears a neighboring apartment door, along the hall, being

pounded on.

There is a muted conversation for a few moments, then more pounding; the noise is getting progressively closer, as they move from one apartment to the next.

Soon, they reach Jack's door.

He reluctantly cracks it open and three thugs push the door in his face, opening it wide. The kid who planted the note is shoved through the open doorway, as the thug holding him points at Jack; "How about this dude? Is this him?"

The boy looks at Jack for a few seconds, then shakes his head and looks down at the floor.

One of the men snaps at the boy: "I'm gettin' a little tired of this shit, sonny-boy! You best be gettin' your memory straight, or I'll be beginnin' to think you made all this shit up!"

He then addresses Jack: "We'll be back next month. Save up an extra ten bucks: insurance premiums are goin' up until we straighten this out."

Then, they pull the kid out of the doorway and leave, moving to the next apartment. Jack closes the door behind them and can still hear the muffled banter, as they continue to move down the hall.

*

The next morning, Jack visits the public library.

He is seated before a computer screen, reading: "Digitoxin toxicity - oral doses effective after two hours: lethal dosage 5 to 25 milligrams, dependent on body mass."

An hour later, he is at The Lunch Box, sitting at the counter, with his coffee.

He waits until Charlie goes into the back room, before quickly stuffing several packets of sugar, from one of the booths, into his pocket. Then, he hurries back to the counter, where he finishes his coffee, before leaving.

*

The pills he stole from Mrs. Murray lay in front of him, on his kitchen table - he has ground them into powder.

Now, he carefully slits open two of the sugar packets he took from The Lunch Box and empties them. He pours the powder into the empty packets, resealing each with a spot of glue.

*

The following day, Jack arrives at The Lunch Box earlier than usual, to find the place empty, except for Charlie.

“How’s things goin’, Charlie?”

Charlie looks at the clock; “Same shit! Just waitin’ for those pricks to show up, as usual.”

As Charlie disappears into the kitchen, Jack immediately moves over to the gang’s booth, removing all the sugar packets from the container. He replaces

them with his own, containing the Digitoxin and returns to the counter.

Minutes later, the Firemen enter boisterously and take their seats at the booth.

“Get your ass out here with the cups, Charlie boy!” DS calls out, as Charlie hurries from the kitchen, coffees in hand.

Jack watches as DS pours the contents of every sugar packet into his coffee, before looking for more.

“Hey, Charlie, man, we need more sugar out here - I like my coffee like my ladies: hot, black and sweet if you know what I mean.”

Charlie rushes over with more sugar.

Jack watches, as DS starts to drink his coffee.

Several minutes pass and he notices DS is becoming quieter, the more he drinks.

“Hey, boy, what’s with ya?” one of the gang remarks; “Ya ain’t said shit and ya ain’t lookin’ that good, either.”

“I ain’t feelin’ so great, somehow,” replies DS; “I’ll be best goin’ home and gettin’ a little nappy in.”

“You be needin’ some help?” one of them asks.

“Since when does I need help with anything?” slurs DS.

He gets up and walks, unsteadily, out of The Lunch Box. A few seconds later, Jack rises and follows him.

DS is stumbling along the sidewalk, towards his building and Jack is following from a distance, across the street. As DS arrives at the door of his apartment building, he opens it and falls into the doorway.

Jack sees him stumble and hurries over; “Come on, man - let me help you.”

With Jack’s help, DS struggles to his feet, slurs in unintelligible agreement and they slowly ascend the stairs to his apartment. DS struggles with the key, finally managing to open the door.

Jack helps him over to his bed, dropping him onto it and sits in a chair next to him. He stares at the prone,

barely conscious man; several minutes pass, as Jack agonizes.

Suddenly, he arises and hurries into the kitchen, searching for a plastic bag. He finds one and returns to the bedroom.

Jack lifts the unconscious DS, slipping the bag over his head; looking away, he clamps the bag in place over the man's nose and mouth, as DS struggles weakly, gasping for breath. After a minute, or so, DS quivers briefly, until, finally, he is lifeless.

Jack rolls his limp body over, on the bed and takes a large wad of bills from the man's pocket, before removing the bag.

He stands for a moment, staring at DS's corpse and again sits back down on the chair, still staring.

He lowers his head into his hands. The words of his priest ring loudly through his mind:

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written: ‘Vengeance is mine, I

will repay, says the Lord'."

Eventually, Jack slowly rises and leaves, using DS's key to lock the door behind him.

An hour later, he is sitting on a church pew, waiting to enter the confessional. As he waits, he kneels, with folded hands and head hanging.

The door of the confessional opens and the confessor before him leaves. Slowly, Jack enters the box.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been five years since my last confession. I have..."

Jack stops.

He restarts the confession: "I have..."

Again, he stops, mid-sentence.

The priest interrupts the silence: "Our Lord forgives all, no matter how great the sin, if the sinner is truly repentant."

"And, if the sin is just?" questions Jack.

"That is for God to decide. First, you must confess and repent, in order to receive absolution."

After another silence, Jack suddenly arises and leaves the confessional.

Chapter 12

"Crazy Shit"

Jack is on the phone; "Petey, this is Jack. I'd like to do a little fishing tomorrow, up at Larry's. What do you think?"

Petey guesses what it is about - still, he asks anyway: "Are you going to bring bait again... like last time?"

"I am - I've got to use it up before it goes bad on me."

Petey hesitates, then reluctantly agrees: "Okay, I guess we'll go, then - I'll call Larry. Pick you up about nine o'clock."

"No, Petey - let's make it about five, so we can get the bait in the trunk without any problems."

"Okay, Jack: five it is," Petey sighs.

The next morning, Jack and Petey are dragging a piece of old carpet up the stairs to DS's apartment.

"What's this for?" Petey asks.

"I grabbed it out of the garbage yesterday," Jack answers; "it's exactly what we need. You'll see."

As they enter the bedroom, Petey gasps on seeing the corpse; "Holy shit, Jack - you really did it!"

"Come on, Petey! You had to know what I was talking about on the phone."

"Yeah, I did... but, actually seeing it is something else!"

"I guess. It's too late now, isn't it?" Jack hastily replies; "Let's get this over with."

They unroll the rug on the floor, alongside the bed - inside, it contains a large plastic bag and some cord. Between them, they work DS's corpse into the bag, before rolling it off the bed and onto the rug. They wrap it and tie it tightly.

Quietly, they slide the rug, heavy with DS's body, down the stairs, one at a time.

Exiting the building, with a lot of pushing and shoving, they cram it into Petey's trunk - it just about fits.

Straight away, they are on their way to Larry's.

On the journey, Petey says: "I never thought you would do it; I know you talked about it and I know you were plenty pissed, but I never thought you would actually do it."

"Neither did I. But, you know what? Now that it's done, I'm glad!"

"What pushed you over the edge, Jack?"

"I was thinking about it for a long time - somebody had to do something! My mother always told me that if you want the right to complain, then you have to earn it, by being willing to do something to change things. I think this is going to change things a lot!"

Jack pauses, in thought; "You know, I heard the story about the old lady, over on Beech Street, the other

day - I think that kind of did it, too.”

“You mean something about a dog? I never got the whole story.”

“These guys were going around the buildings, lookin’ to find out about that note. When they came into her place, her dog nipped one of them - a little dog, about the size of a mouse; the prick took the dog and threw it out of the third-floor window. When the old lady started screaming and crying, they took her over to the window and hung her half-way out, threatening to throw her out, too, if she didn’t stop yelling. When I heard that, it was the final straw: I knew what I had to do... and I did it.”

“What was it like, Jack? Killin’ him, I mean.”

“You should know: Larry said you killed a shitload in ‘Nam.”

“But, I mean up close and personal, like you did. I told you: I never really saw the guys I killed up close.”

“You know what, Petey?” Jack takes a deep breath and continues: “It wasn’t that bad, after all. I guess I

hated the son of a bitch so much, for what he was doing, that it was like killing a mosquito - squashing it was a service, not a sin! You know that not you or anybody else will ever be bitten by that bastard again.”

*

As they pull up to Larry’s front porch, the rug-wrapped body in the trunk, they see Larry sitting with a beer and a cigar, with Rusty lying next to him, as usual.

“Good to see you, boys, again. How was the ride up?”

“I would have liked it better if we didn’t have our passenger ridin’ shotgun in the trunk,” answers Petey.

Larry grins; “Look at it this way: you guys are like the sanitation department for your neighborhood - you’re just pickin’ up the garbage and takin’ it to the landfill; helpin’ to keep the streets clean. Who could argue with that?”

He turns to Jack: "How about you, Jack? Things okay by you?"

"Yeah, great!" Jack replies, snarkily.

Larry taps on the trunk's decklid; "Know what you mean, know what you mean. Okay, let's get to it," he commands: "drive on down to the garage and we'll get started"

*

As DS's naked body is laid out on the plywood sheet, Jack spies a ring on his finger, glittering in a beam of sunlight, which streams through the open garage door.

"Wait a minute!" He reaches toward the ring; "Let me get that ring off his finger."

At this, Larry pushes Jack aside and draws his pocket knife.

"What are you doing?" queries Jack.

"You don't think you're gonna just pull that thing

off, with his finger swelled up like that, do ya? Let me show ya how it's done - I got some practice with this kinda stuff."

With that, Larry proceeds to cut off the finger, the ring still on it. Having done so, he tears a strip from DS's shirt, wraps the finger in it and hands the little parcel to Jack. As blood immediately soaks through the cloth, Jack takes it, timidly.

"What the hell am I going to do with this?" he blurts.

"Let me tell you a story," Larry begins: "back in 'Nam - I still remember the day: August fifth, nineteen sixty-eight - we was out in the bush, like usual. There was about ten of us, marchin' through the jungle, surrounded by snakes, bugs and, of course, the Cong; we was moving through the real thick stuff. All of a sudden, one of our guys went down - a sniper was firing on us. Then, a couple of other guys went down; the rest of us scurried for cover. One of our guys got shot right through the head... he fell on top of me.

“Everybody started screamin’ and shootin’, then the guy behind me stood up to get a look for the sniper and ‘pop’: he got one in the head; he fell right on top of me, too. So, I just lay there – all I could hear was shots and lots of screaming.

“Then, after a while, it all went quiet. Time passed. Eventually, I looked out from underneath the two guys on top of me and I saw the Cong sniper, slidin’ down a tree, about twenty yards away from me – I knew it was him! I took a bead on him and ‘bang!’ – got him... like shootin’ a squirrel out of a tree.

“It was quiet some more, ‘til I rolled out from underneath the guys; I guess they saved me, ‘cause they’d taken a bunch of bullets in the back, while they was layin’ on me. I got up and went to see the other guys – only one of them was still alive: my buddy, Knotsy. I radioed for a chopper to come and get us... what was left of us, anyway. Knotsy was passed out – I couldn’t do nothing for him, except wait with him.

“Then I seen the dead Cong, layin’ about five yards away from us. Somethin’ came over me and all of a sudden, I just *had* to do it: I walked over and looked at him, layin’ there - I knew I couldn’t just leave, without takin’ some revenge for what he did. So, I took out my knife and cut off his trigger finger, shoved it in my pocket and started to walk away. Then, I stopped and went back... I cut off one of his ears and stuffed that in my pocket, too.”

Larry takes out his wallet, removing a thin, black, wrinkled object, encased in clear plastic, as he continues his story; “When I got back to base, I cut the finger’s bone out, flattened it and dried it, then, I laminated it in plastic, so I could keep it - kinda like the Indians in South America do, with those shrunken heads, I guess. Here it is.”

Larry lunges toward Jack with the encased finger and Jack recoils.

“Why in Christ’s name did you do that?” Petey

exclaims.

“Revenge, Petey! Revenge, I told ya! Every time I look at it, I feel like I’m gettin’ a little even with that prick, for killin’ all my guys. It might seem kinda nutty, but it makes me feel better.”

Larry pauses for a while and stares at the ground.

“When I got home from ‘Nam, I started havin’ what the shrinks called ‘episodes’ - I call ‘em ‘bein’ scared shitless’. The spells come outta nowhere! When I’m alone at night, I lay in bed and the whole thing happens all over again: I’m back there in that jungle - I can see, hear, feel and smell every minute of that day, like it’s happenin’ all over again. Maybe it’s because I can’t never get rid of the fear and hate deep down - it’s so strong that it stuck inside me.”

“Did you ever talk to anybody about it,” asks Jack, “like a doctor, I mean?”

“I did some talkin’ about it, with the shrinks down at the VA, a few years ago, but that didn’t help much - I

guess they just thought I was nuts and that was it. They put a label on me: 'PTSD', they called me; I suppose once they put a label on ya, they figure they did their job: 'case closed' - ya know what I mean? They gave me some pills, but I stopped takin' them - they gave me headaches."

Larry pauses again, still looking at the ground.

"I did a shitload over there and when I came back, too - you know: pot, acid, chipped a little horse and *lots* of Jack D. I thought that might have somethin' to do with all this crazy shit that was goin' on with me, so, a few years back, I went stone-cold sober; I lasted more than six months, but it didn't do no good: they still came back."

After a few more moments of silence, Larry looks up, from his trance-like state.

"What happened to the ear?" Jack asks him, timidly; "Did you keep that, too?"

"No, I gave it to the other guy with me - Knotsy - and he kept it, just like me. We usta call him 'Knotsy'

'cause he always said he had a knot in his stomach, right from the day he landed in 'Nam. Knotsy and me were pretty good buds the whole time in 'Nam, especially after that day with the Cong... shit, we were the only two guys left of our original bunch! After we got out of that shithole and back to the States, we lost touch - maybe a Christmas card now and then, but that was about it."

"And, you never saw him again?" asks Petey.

"I did see him again - one day, about ten years after we was out, he calls me out of the blue and we got together for a couple of drinks and bullshit. He said he was doin' pretty good - makin' a lot of bucks; he never really said exactly *what* he was doin', just that it was workin' out alright. Just before we split, he pulled out his wallet and shows me the ear - it was all laminated in plastic, like my finger. He told me it was his good luck charm and without it he would never be doin' as good as he was.

"When we was talkin', I told him I wanted to buy

this fish farm, but I didn't know if I could swing it. I never saw or talked to him again, but, about a month later, I got a check in the mail for ten grand, with a note that says: 'Good luck fishing. Some money for bait.' It was from Knotsy. That ten grand is about thirty or forty-thou today! I cashed the check and that's how 'Larry's Fishin' Hole' got started. The envelope had no return address and I never heard from him again."

"Man, that's some story, Larry!" exclaims Jack. "You really never saw the guy again?"

"Nope! Never even got to thank him."

Jack holds up the blood-soaked rag, containing the finger; "So, why are you giving me this?"

"If I was you, I'd get it back to that Fireman bunch," explains Larry: "I'm pretty sure that would back 'em off, big time."

"You know, Larry, I think you're right." Jack shoves the package into his pocket.

*

The next morning, Jack is at The Lunch Box, with his coffee.

As Charlie goes to the kitchen, Jack hurriedly places an object into the sugar bowl.

Within minutes, the Firemen arrive boisterously and sit in their usual booth.

Suddenly, screams erupt from them and they pile up all over each other, jumping from the booth.

“Holy fuckin’ shit!” one of them cries out.

“What the fuck is that!?”

Hearing the uproar, Charlie rushes from the kitchen. “Holy shit!” he shouts, staring at the table.

The sugar bowl is overturned, the severed finger lying on the table, a Christmas tag tied to the distinctive ring it wears. The tag reads:

“Merry Christmas. We’re not fucking around anymore - back off! The Grey Army.”

Jack smiles faintly to himself and slowly turns on his stool. He arises and walks out of the place, feeling an inner glow of self-satisfaction.

Chapter 13

"A Visitor"

A week later, there is a sharp knock at Jack's front door.

Looking through the peephole, Jack immediately recognizes the man as a member of the Firemen gang, who he has seen at The Lunch Box on many occasions – a man known as "DFN".

"What do you want?" Jack calls, through the door.

"I just wanna talk, man. Nothin' else - just talk! I come in peace, Paleface - I ain't got no gun or nothin'. I come in peace, Bro!"

"Talk about what?"

"Well, if ya open this door, I'll tell ya. Can't be talkin' to no closed door, out here."

"Take off your shirt."

"What!?"

"I said, take off your shirt," Jack repeats, "and turn

your pockets inside out and turn around.”

DFN scowls: “Okay.”

As he strips, Jack goes to the kitchen and gets a large knife, before returning and cautiously cracking open the door. By now, DFN stands before the door, shirtless, with his pockets turned out.

“Can I put my duds back on now, man?”

“Okay.”

DFN puts his shirt back on and Jack warily opens the door.

DFN looks at the knife in Jack’s hand, as he enters; “You don’t be needin’ that knife: I told ya I come in peace, didn’t I?”

Warily, Jack lowers the knife to his side. “So, what’s this all about?” he asks.

“I wanna talk about what happened to DS.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jack feigns ignorance. “What happened... and who is DS?”

“Come on, man - you don’t have ta bullshit me,”

DFN replies, with a grin; "I know you know what happened - I *saw* ya."

"What the hell are you talking about? Saw what?"

"You know goddamn well what. Didn't I just say don't bullshit me?"

"Alright, let's hear what you think you know," Jack questions.

"Man, I don't *think* I know - I *know*! Here's how it goes: ya know that kid ya sent with that note, down to the Box - he was my little nephew and he knew damn well who you was, even with that shitty disguise ya was wearin'! I told him not to tell anybody he knew ya, but to watch ya, real careful, like. He saw ya when ya carried DS up to his place - I don't know how DS got all fucked up like he was, but my boy did see ya carry him upstairs. And, after that, he saw ya leave, so he came and got me.

"The next afternoon I went to his place, I jimmied the lock and I went in and... guess what? No DS and never did see him since.

“So, what does that make me think? Makes me think you had somethin’ to do with him goin’ disappeared. What would you think, if you was me?”

There is a long silence, as Jack stares at DFN. After a while, he speaks: “If that’s what you think and that’s what you know, how come you never told the rest of your gang? If you did, I’m sure they would have come for me by now.”

DFN immediately blurts out his reply: “I hated that motherfucker! I wished somebody woulda done him sooner! He raped my little sister when she was eleven - she told me about it; she wouldn’t tell anybody else, ‘cause he said he’d kill her - and everybody else - if she did. I’m sure he woulda, too. After a while, he kinda figured out that I knew what he’d done, maybe ‘cause of the way I was always lookin’ at him - I couldn’t keep from starin’ at him all the time and I guess he sensed I knew, because of that.

“That’s when he put that ‘DFN’ tag on me - means

'Dumb Fuckin' Nigger'. I guess he wanted to make the rest of 'em think I was stupid, so nothing I said would be believed, just in case I went and told what he'd done."

"What's your real name?"

"Clyde - Clyde Johnson."

"Why did you stay in the gang?"

"You just don't quit! Quit them and you quit livin'!"

"So, why are you here now, talking to me?" Jack replies, with a frown.

"Well, I gotta give you some stars! After two of our guys disappeared and we got the two notes, you scared everybody! It's one thing when you can see people comin' up on ya, but another when it's outta nowhere. I gotta tell ya: when DS's dead-ass finger jumped outta that sugar bowl, that was tops! Man, that really scared the shit outta everybody, including me! That was some great shit! Guys were startin' ta talk all kinds of ghost and spook shit - it freaked 'em all out; they were pissin' in their pants!

“Course, I didn’t believe any of that silly shit, ‘cause, like I told you, I knew what I knew. But, it was my chance to get out and I took it: I told ‘em all that I thought it was some kinda spooky spirit stuff and I was leavin’! Not one of ‘em tried to stop me, or even said a word of bad shit about me - they was all more scared than I made out I was.”

“You still didn’t answer my question: why are you here now?”

“I know DS always carried lots of cash around with him - I mean, like, a *stack* of bennies; maybe a few grand. And I’m sure he musta had it with him. I think a piece of that should be mine, seein’ as I kinda saved ya a lotta hurt - I’m here to collect it.”

“What makes you think I’ve got it?”

Clyde smirks and replies: “What makes me think ya don’t?”

Jack pauses, waiting for Clyde to continue, but Clyde stays silent. Jack sighs.

“Alright, but you have to give me a little more time - I don’t have it right here.”

“I don’t really believe ya; I’m gonna give ya a little time, but not much - I’ll be back tomorrow. And, don’t think ya be gettin’ one over on me - just because I had that DFN tag hung on me, don’t mean it’s true, ‘cause it ain’t.”

Clyde leaves and Jack locks the door behind him.

He waits for a minute, then goes to the refrigerator, drawing out a plastic bag, from the back of the freezer; opening it reveals the thick bundle of money he took from DS. He quickly scans the wad of cash, before closing up the bag and putting it back in the freezer.

He goes into the living room and turns on the TV, falling into a daze, as he stares at it.

A “BREAKING NEWS” banner flashes across the screen, breaking his trance and the announcer begins to speak:

“James Wheeler has been released from prison,

having served six months of his one-and-a-half-year sentence. Mr. Wheeler pleaded guilty to malfeasance and embezzlement, following the collapse of Tyron Industries, early last year - the failure of Tyron cost thousands their jobs and life-savings."

Some footage is shown of Wheeler emerging from a limo, outside his building, the number and street name of which are clearly visible, as the announcer continues speaking:

"Mr. Wheeler left Tacomy State Prison without comment. He is still suspected of depositing millions in offshore accounts, hidden from attack by creditors and pension fund officials."

Jack is still seated, staring at the TV screen.

"Fucking six months," he mutters to himself, "after ruining hundreds of lives!"

He gets up and angrily snaps off the television.

*

The next morning, Jack boards a bus, headed to the city.

When he gets off, he finds the address and sits in a park, facing Wheeler's building.

Time passes and Jack watches many people enter and leave. Finally, Wheeler emerges, with his dog on a leash. Jack observes as he turns the corner and disappears down an adjacent street.

Immediately, Jack stands up and walks toward the bus stop, heading back home.

Chapter 14

"A Plan"

The next morning, Clyde again appears at Jack's door.

Again, Jack warily cracks the door open, leaving the chain latch in place.

"I come for my money, man - I sure hope you got it."

"Yeah, I got it. One minute."

Jack unlatches the door and goes to the kitchen. He returns, with the bag, to find Clyde pointing a gun at him.

Startled, Jack demands: "What the fuck is going on here!?"

"Just wanted to make sure you're comin' back with the cash and nothin' else," Clyde answers.

Jack hands him the wad of money - Clyde lowers the gun and quickly counts it.

"Forty-two hundred sounds about right. I'm sure

you kept a little for yourself, but that's okay by me: as long as I got mine, I'm no hog."

As he turns to leave, Jack suddenly calls him back: "Wait a minute. Wanta make some real money, real easy?"

Clyde slowly turns back to face him and Jack motions towards the kitchen; "Come on and have a beer and I'll tell you how."

They go into the kitchen, Jack gets Clyde a beer from the refrigerator and, together, they sit at the table.

"Did you ever hear of James Wheeler?"

"Was I supposed to?"

"How about Tyron?" Jack continues.

"Never did - never heard of neither one of 'em."

"I used to work for Tyron - had a pretty good job. Then, one day, the whole company collapsed - my job, my pension, everything - right down the shit-can. The guy who ran the company was this James Wheeler; they charged him with embezzlement - the word was that he'd

salted away a bunch of cash, offshore, but the Feds could never find it. He kept saying that when Tyron went down, he lost *his* ass too. In the end, they got him on some small shit; he only got a year-and-a-half and he didn't even do that - they paroled him early!"

"Some shit!" interrupts Clyde.

"I saw him on TV when he got released. He lives over in the city - I've been there a bunch of times, doin' some surveillance. I know he's got the money - I just *know* it - and I got a plan to get it... or, at least, a good amount of it."

"I like the sound of all that money, but where do I come into all this?"

"Not only you - your little nephew, too," Jack replies. "Wheeler's got this dog - when I worked there, everybody said he liked the dog more than his old lady! He used to bring it to work with him, on a regular basis - he even had the dog with him when he interviewed people for jobs or promotions; word was that if the dog

didn't take to the guy right away, he didn't have a chance of getting the job. I guess Wheeler figured his dog had ESP, or something. Anyway, he's in love with the fucking mutt!

"So, my plan is to kidnap the dog and ransom it back to Wheeler - if he comes up with the money, then we can be pretty sure that he's got more, squirreled away somewhere; if not, then I guess we can be sure that he's on the level about being broke, 'cause, like I said, he'd do anything for that mutt. If he does have more money, I guess the next step is figuring out how to get it from him."

"And, how are ya gonna do that?" asks Clyde.

"I'm not sure."

There is a brief silence before Clyde replies: "I got an idea that's gonna make it real easy."

He explains his plan, adding: "Let me get back to Morris - he'll do whatever I say, so it won't be any problem."

“Who’s Morris?”

“He’s my little nephew – that’s his name. He’s a pretty smart little shit – he’ll catch on real quick.”

*

The following day, Jack and Morris are sitting on the park bench, across the street from Wheeler’s building, waiting for him to walk the dog. Morris is playing a handheld video game.

When Wheeler emerges, with his dog, Jack says to Morris: “Okay, kid, let’s go.”

Immediately, Morris leaves Jack’s side and casually approaches Wheeler, where he begins to make a fuss over the dog.

“Oh, mister, what a cute little doggie. Can I pet him?”

Wheeler smiles broadly: “Sure, sonny - he likes being petted.”

Morris pets the dog playfully. "I sure wish I had a dog like him. What's his name?"

"Sparky," Wheeler replies, still smiling. "And, what's your name, sonny?"

"I'm Morris." Without looking up, Morris adds: "That's a cool name - I like Sparky. Can I come and see him again tomorrow?"

"I think Sparky likes you, too," agrees Wheeler: "see his tail going? I'm sure he wants to see you again. Sparky and I will be here, same time tomorrow."

"I'll be here, too," answers Morris, excitedly.

As Wheeler walks away, Morris returns to Jack at the bench and they leave for home.

*

The next day, at the exact same time, Wheeler exits the building, with Sparky. And, as pre-planned, Morris approaches and begins to pet the dog.

Suddenly, the boy pulls out a pair of cutting pliers and snips the leash in one, before picking up the small dog and running.

Wheeler is momentarily stunned, before shouting: "No! Come back! Come back!"

He starts to chase Morris and is nearly hit by a passing car, as he darts across the street in pursuit.

After a short run into the park, Wheeler stops, panting heavily, with his hands on his hips; he can only watch, as Morris and Sparky disappear in the distance, into the park.

Morris brings the dog to Jack, who is waiting at the park's far end.

Jack tapes Sparky's mouth and feet with duct tape, then draws a can of ether from the roller suitcase he has brought with him. He sprays some onto a rag, which he uses to cover Sparky's nose; very shortly, the dog lies still. He then puts Sparky into the roller luggage bag and they leave to get the bus home.

Arriving home that afternoon, Jack and Morris lay the luggage in front of them and Jack opens the bag.

Sparky is not moving. A little confused, he untapes the dog's mouth and watches as its jaw drops open, tongue protruding. Jack looks up at Morris, with a solemn stare.

Morris immediately realizes what has happened and begins to scream: "He's dead! Sparky's dead! You killed him!" Tears stream down his cheeks.

Jack is shocked. For a moment, he isn't sure what to do. He starts trying to console Morris, as best he can; "Hey, kid, I didn't mean to do it - I just wanted to keep him quiet. I guess I gave him too much! It was an accident - honest, kid, it was an accident!"

Morris continues to sob; "I loved Sparky! I even thought that if Mr. Wheeler wouldn't buy him back, I coulda kept him - I thought about that a lot!"

Again, Jack hesitates - he is not sure what more he can say to the grieving Morris. "I know, kid, but there's

nothing we can do now - we just gotta keep going like we planned. We sure don't want Sparky's death to be for nothing, do we? Now, go get your uncle - I want to talk with him."

An hour later, Clyde arrives at Jack's apartment and immediately sees the dog, lying on the floor, next to the luggage.

"What the fuck are we gonna do now?" he blurts, in surprise.

"I say we go through with the whole thing as planned," Jack answers; "we don't have to say shit about the dog being dead - he won't know until it's time for us to collect the money."

"And what's gonna happen then?"

"Who knows and who cares?" Jack replies. "We get the money and it's game over. We send the kid with this note tomorrow, right?" Jack shows Clyde the note he has prepared.

Clyde takes it and slowly starts to read aloud, in a

low voice: "If you want your dog back, be at Winter Park, in the woods at the edge of the ball field, at seven on Wednesday night. Bring \$10K and I'll bring the dog, with a can of gasoline and a match, just in case you don't show up, or don't come alone, or don't bring the money.'"

Clyde looks up from the paper; "Do you really think this is gonna work?"

"I wouldn't have written it if I didn't."

"I guess it's all we got, now," replies Clyde.

*

A doorman is stationed at the entrance to Wheeler's building and Morris warily walks up to him.

"This is for Mr. Wheeler." He hands the note to the doorman and quickly runs away.

*

On Wednesday night, it is drizzling and a light mist covers Winter Park.

Jack and Clyde are in the shadows, under trees at the edge of the park, awaiting Wheeler's arrival.

As a man appears in the distance and approaches them, Jack whispers to Clyde: "It's Wheeler." Then, in a low voice, he shouts: "Wheeler? Is that you?"

"Yes," Wheeler replies.

"Did you bring it?"

"No," Wheeler answers.

"No!? How do you think you're gonna get your fuckin' dog back, then?" Clyde shouts, excitedly. "I hope this ain't no trick - if it is, we're gonna have a hot dog-roast, right here and now." He pulls a cigarette lighter from his pocket and flicks it on.

Seeing the flame through the darkness, Wheeler panics: "No trick! No trick! I just don't have the money! Don't! Please, don't!"

“What about all that money you hid?” Jack yells out.

Wheeler answers anxiously: “I never had any money hidden - that was media bullshit! It sells papers like the truth never could. I lost my ass, like everybody else. The only ones that got anything out of that whole deal were the lawyers - they picked the bones clean. I brought eight-hundred with me - that’s all I could come up with; it’s all I’ve got!”

“How come you pleaded guilty, then?” Jack shouts.

“I had to - they threatened me with thirty years if I didn’t!”

“How is it you’re livin’ in a fancy building, with a doorman and all, if you ain’t got no money?” exclaims Clyde, in disbelief.

“That’s no fancy building! The elevator doesn’t even work - it’s been broken for a month now. And the doorman... he’s no doorman - he’s a rent-a-cop; he’s only been posted there since I moved in. See, I’ve had a couple of death threats, by people that think I screwed

them - the guy who owns the building is a friend of mine and he hired a cop, to give me security until the whole thing blows over.

“So, what about Sparky? Will you give him to me? Here’s the eight-hundred bucks.”

A brief silence fills the air, as Wheeler holds the money out, in front of him.

“Listen, just give him to me and I’ll try to get some more money, honest!” he pleads. “Just take this now, give him to me and tell me where to leave the next lot of money - when I get it, I’ll leave it, I swear!”

Clyde whispers to Jack: “Come on, man - you may as well tell him.”

Jack says nothing.

“Come on, man - tell ‘im.”

More silence from Jack, before Clyde, yells, impatiently: “Your fuckin’ dog’s dead!”

There follows a brief silence, before Wheeler’s mournful scream echoes through the mist. “Sparky’s

dead!" he cries.

Jack begins to speak: "Listen, we didn't mean to hurt him-"

But, before he can continue, Wheeler pulls out a knife and rushes them.

"You motherfuckers killed my Sparky!" he shouts, slashing at Jack, but missing.

Clyde instinctively pulls out his gun and shoots.

Wheeler hits the ground, mud-covered, lying in a puddle and bleeding.

Silence.

"I think you killed him," Jack says, nervously.

The silence continues, briefly, before Clyde speaks; "Yeah, he's dead!"

He turns to Jack; "I didn't have any choice - if I didn't shoot him, he woulda sliced you right up! The man just went crazy! I saved you - if it wasn't for me, *you'd* be the guy layin' there in that mud!"

"All this shit and all he had was a lousy eight-

hundred bucks,” Jack remarks, in disgust. “What the fuck are we going to do now?”

“We can’t just leave him here.”

“Why not?” Jack responds.

“If we leave him, they’ll start lookin’ for whoever killed him right away.”

“So what?”

“You know how many guys I seen think they’d never get caught? They still got tagged!” Clyde explains.

“If we get rid of him, the cops will probably think he left town with the money he stashed – they’ll be lookin’ for *him*, not *us*. They might even look in some foreign country, ‘cause everybody thinks that’s where he hid it. If they never find the body, they won’t never even know he’s dead and they’ll never be lookin’ for the guy who did it.”

“Clyde, for a guy who they called ‘dumb’, I have to say, you make a lot of sense.”

“Now, I don’t know how you did it, but you must be

pretty good at getting rid of dead people, 'cause I never did see DS again, after you got done with him. Let's pull him over here and cover him in a little brush, just in case somebody happens by."

They drag the body underneath a pine tree, where they cover it with sticks and wet leaves. Then, Jack takes out his phone and calls Petey.

"Petey, it's me, Jack. Listen, do you think you can help me out? Can you bring your car and some garbage bags and pick me up over here on Seventy-Eighth Street, by the park entrance?"

"What's going on?" Petey asks.

"I'll explain more when you get here - just get here."

Jack hangs up the phone.

"Is he gonna come?" asks Clyde.

Jack answers confidently: "Goddamn right he's gonna come - no problem there! He's seen me in action and I know he's scared shitless of me - he's gonna do whatever I tell him to. You wait here and make sure

nobody comes snoopin' and I'll go meet him."

Jack waits by the edge of the park.

Immediately, as Petey pulls up, Jack commands:
"Gimme the bags."

He takes the garbage bags and disappears into the park. He returns, moments later; "Open the trunk."

Petey pops the trunk - it is packed full of junk.

"What's all this shit you got in here!?" Jack complains. "Open the back door."

Minutes later, Clyde appears from the park, carrying the bag-wrapped body, over his shoulder.

"Put him in here," commands Jack. "Get in and let's go."

Clyde puts the body down, in the back seat.

"What the fuck's going on?" exclaims Petey.
"What's in the bag?"

"We have to take a ride to Larry's tomorrow morning - early," Jack answers.

"Holy shit! You got to be kiddin'! Not again!?"

When they arrive at the back of Petey's building, they clean out the car's trunk and stuff Wheeler inside.

"See ya in the mornin' light, about six," Jack tells Petey; "call Larry and tell him we're comin'."

Chapter 15

"Revenge is Bitter"

Larry and Rusty are once again sitting on the front porch, as Jack and Petey pull up.

"I see ya brought me another of your local pricks. How many more is it gonna take, before they catch on and get the fuck outta town on ya? I'm guessin' they're a bunch of dumb fucks - slow learners; you're trying to teach 'em, but they don't seem to be learnin'. Right, Jack?"

"It's just not sinkin' in with them," remarks Petey.

"Let's go inside and have a couple of beers before we finish this up," Larry answers; "kinda get our stomachs up for it, if you know what I mean."

Hours pass, until the three of them, are seated around Larry's table, now littered with empty beer bottles.

“When the bullshit flies, so does the time. Gonna be dark soon - we gotta take care of this before it gets too dark. Let’s go.”

They all rise and leave the house, as Petey drives the car around to the garage.

The sun is about to set and the landscape is dull grey. As Jack and Petey place Wheeler’s naked body onto the plywood sheet, only his dark outline can be made out, barely; in the dim light, his skin color appears as a dull grey. His face is still covered with plastic - Petey wants it that way.

Jack stares skyward and points. Several crows are sitting on the limb of a dead tree, silhouetted against the distant, bright sky. They are cawing loudly, while one of their group is being attacked by two others.

“What’s goin’ on with those birds?” asks Jack.

Larry looks up at the crows; “My mama us’ta call it ‘holdin’ court’ - I remember seein’ it lots of times when I was a kid. Crows, when they think one of ‘em screws up,

all get together and cackle about it - kinda like a trial - then they kick his ass and chase him outta the flock. They maybe even kill 'em if he don't get away in time."

"What do ya think he did?" Petey wonders, out loud.

"How the fuck would I know?" Larry answers. "How could I know what's goin' on in a bird's head? I don't even know what's goin' on in my own head, half the time. I guess he just pissed 'em off. Kinda like people - sometimes people get pissed and it eats at 'em; all they wanta do is get even, no matter what."

Then, he pauses; "Ya know, come to think of it, maybe Ma was wrong: maybe it's not a trial their havin', but more like a lynch mob."

As they turn their attention away from the birds, Larry starts to get dressed in his rain slicker and mask. He starts up the chainsaw, ready to start the dissection, then suddenly stops, pointing to a drop-light, hanging on the wall.

"Grab that light over there - I can't see what the fuck

I'm doing here! I don't wanta be cuttin' off my own leg!"

Jack turns on the light and holds it high, as Larry points to the bag on Wheeler's head.

"And get that bag off his head! If ya don't wanta see, Petey, then look away; I don't wanta be gummin' up the saw, here."

Jack pulls the bag from Wheeler's face, fully illuminating it.

Larry stares at the uncovered face of the dead man.

"What the fuck is this?" he demands. "This ain't no young punk! What's goin' on here? I'm all for helpin' you guys get rid of those little pricks that are terrorizing your neighborhood, but I'm not for choppin' up every Tom, Dick, and Harry, when I don't know who they are or what they done!"

Petey exclaims, excitedly: "Larry, I didn't know! I thought it was one of the gang, like you did."

They both look expectantly at Jack and he starts to explain: "Did you ever hear of Tyron ... about the Tyron

collapse?”

“Can’t say as I did. I don’t never watch the news - I can’t deal with it; ain’t watched it in years.” Larry is staring at Wheeler’s face, the whole time he is speaking; “I guess it don’t make no never mind - now he’s here, we gotta get rid of him.”

Larry doesn’t wait for Jack’s explanation to continue - instead, he restarts the saw and begins the dismemberment.

When the morbid task is finished, the remains are taken to the pond. Jack holds the flashlight, as Larry tosses the final shovelful of Wheeler’s remains into the pond.

“We gotta burn the guy’s duds - gimme that flashlight.”

Larry picks up Wheeler’s pants, from the pile of clothes and shines the light on them, rustling through the pockets. He takes out Wheeler’s wallet, glances at it briefly and puts it into his own pocket. He then throws

the clothing into the iron barrel and sets it on fire.

*

On Larry's porch, it is dark, except for the dim light.

The three of them are sitting, with a beer in hand, while Larry is shuffling through Wheeler's wallet, inspecting the contents with his flashlight.

Jack is staring into space. He lowers his head into his hands, as the priest's words echo through his mind, as clear as if he had only just heard them:

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written: 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'."

"Jack, are you okay?" asks Petey.

Jack lifts his head and replies: "Yeah, sure." He changes the subject: "Larry, what did you find in the wallet?"

"'Wheeler - James Wheeler'!" Larry says, in a low

tone of voice.

“Yeah, that was his name,” Jack responds.

In Larry’s hand, he holds a small, dark item from Wheeler’s wallet – an object laminated in plastic. Larry sits and stares at it.

After a few seconds, he silently rises to his feet and goes into the house, slamming the screen door behind him. Jack and Petey remain on the porch, drinking in silence, until the screen door slams again, as Larry comes back out of the house, behind them.

A shotgun blast rings out and Jack is catapulted forward, out of his chair - tossed face down onto the porch floor, the back of his head is blown away.

Petey is stunned and immediately drops his beer, spinning to face Larry, who stands with the smoking shotgun, now lowered down to his side.

“Don’t worry, Petey,” he says: “I ain’t gonna shoot you.”

Petey shouts horrified: “Holy shit! You just killed

Jack! Right out of the blue... like that! Why?"

Larry sits down in Jack's empty seat, the gun still in his hand. "I had to. I just had to."

"What the fuck do you mean, you 'had to'!?" Petey shouts, in panic.

Larry reaches into his pocket and slowly brings out the dark, plastic object, taken from Wheeler's wallet. He stares at it; "Know what this is?"

"Can't really tell," answers Petey; "looks like beef jerky."

"It's a Cong's ear - been in this guy's wallet since sixty-eight... when I gave it to him."

"You mean... you knew the guy we just put in the pond?"

"Knew him? Shit, yeah, I knew him! He was Knotsy, my bud from 'Nam. When we first pulled off the bag, I thought he looked familiar, but I ain't seen him in twenty-five years or more, so I didn't really recognize him right away. Jack never told us his name, so I never

put anything together, until I pulled out his wallet and saw his name: Wheeler - that was Knotsy's last name. When I found this, I knew for sure it was him." He holds up the ear.

"But, why did you kill Jack? He couldn't have known Wheeler was your friend."

"Don't know - I guess it was just that old 'Nam thing, came right over me again. I just had to."

Larry is staring into space, speaking almost robotically: "After I found the ear in Knotsy's wallet, I looked at Jack and it was like Jack - all of a sudden - was just like that Cong I shot outta the tree in 'Nam. I tried to look away, but somethin' was makin' me keep lookin' back at him and every time I looked, I wanted to see Jack, but I just kept seein' that Cong sniper's face. I could smell the jungle, hear the sounds and feel the heat. I just knew that I had to shoot him, or that fuckin' Cong would get me and Knotsy, too. I *had* to do it!"

The shotgun is lying across Larry's lap, still smoking

faintly and the air is filled with the smell of burnt gunpowder, as both men continue to sit, with glass-eyed, silent stares.

*

Several days have passed.

There is knocking on Petey's apartment door. When he opens it, he sees Clyde, standing in the doorway.

"Petey, I ain't seen Jack around lately," Clyde says; "I went over to his place a couple of times, but ain't nobody there. Where's Jack?"

Petey hesitates and swallowed hard before replying: "Jack..."

A long pause follows, then:

"Jack went fishin'."

Another pause and Clyde continued.

"The reason I wanted to see him is to tell him that the Fireman got some new recruits and they're at it

again.”

“What do you mean ‘at it again’?”

“They’re comin’ around for the dues like before”
Clyde answered.

“Wouldn’t you think they woulda got the message and given it up by now? What’s it gonna take?” Petey mused out loud.

“Did you really think they were gonna let go of all those old geese around here layin’ the golden eggs just like that? Not a chance” replied Clyde.

There was another brief silence and Clyde continued.

“The only way that they would ever give it up is if somebody killed ‘em all!”

He turned and started to leave. He suddenly stopped and turned to face Petey for a brief moment.

“They’ll probably be over here to see you too before the week is over” he called back.

Chapter 16

"Kill 'em All"

Petey slowly closed the door as Clyde disappeared down the dimly lit hallway.

"The only way that would ever happen is if somebody killed 'em all!" Clyde's words echoed through his head.

"Kill 'em all! Kill 'em all!" bounced off every corner of his mind.

He slumped in the easy chair in his living room and mused.

*

Two days past.

Petey was taking his TV dinner from the oven. He placed on the stovetop to cool when he heard raucous

voices ringing from the hallway. Within minutes a loud, pounding rattled his door.

He cautiously opened it a crack and peered out. Three men in threatening poses stood in front of the doorway.

“Haven’t seen you in a long time. I’m sure were missin’ us so now we decided to stop by and see ya. We didn’t want ya to keep worryin’ about somethin’ happenin’ to us.” one of them spoke with a sly snicker.

One of the others then pushed the door open more widely.

“Let’s cut the bull shit. I know why you’re here. You’re back in the shakedown racket” Petey answered smartly.

The man turned and looked at his two accomplices and then back to Petey.

“We got us here a real wise guy so let’s get right to it. Give over the sixty bucks” he demanded.

Petey reached in his pocket and pulled out fifty

dollars and handed it to him.

“I said sixty, didn’t I? Seems like you’re not listenin’ too good.”

“Last time you were here it was fifty” Petey answered.

“Yeah, that was last time; this time is this time and we’re talkin’ sixty. You gotta know our expenses are goin’ up too.

Do ya know what a gram of coke goes for these days?

If I don’t keep these guys happy they can get pretty mean and I’m sure you don’t wanta see ‘em mean, do ya?” he laughed.

“And by why way, don’t look at this as a shakedown; it’s more like health insurance. Know what I’m sayin’?” he continued with a grin.

“That’s all I got” Petey replied.

There was a brief silence.

“Well, seein’ as you’re an old-time customer we’re

gonna let it go this time but ya better be savin' up for next time."

With that, he spit through the doorway onto Petey's floor.

"There's your receipt!"

All three then turned and moved to the next door down the hall.

Petey closed his door and went into the living room. He sat and pondered for several minutes then finally reached for the phone.

*

It was about nine-thirty, a Wednesday morning. Petey and one of his friends stepped in the Lunch Box and sat at the counter. Charlie entered from the back room while drying his hands on his grease-stained apron.

"Petey! I haven't seen you in a dog's age. What'll you guys have?" he exclaimed.

Within seconds, the door opened once more and in poured the Fireman gang, loudly laughing and shouting. They wrested into their usual booth and called to Charlie.

“Charlie my man, get your lily-white ass over here, pronto” one shouted.

“And bring my coffee with ya. Make it like I likes my ladies, hot, black and waitin’ for the cream” another one laughed.

Petey turned to face them.

“Now boys, I think we were here first and he’s going to take our order. Everybody has to wait his turn” he said in a soft chiding, voice.

“Who you callin’ ‘boy’ motherfucker?” came the reply.

“I gotta use the little boy’s room,” said Petey’s friend quietly. He reached down and picked up the satchel he had bought with him and left for the restroom at the back of the shop.

“Looks like your chicken shit buddy left you all

alone. I think he had to go to the can because he was about to piss in his pants” one the Fireman laughed.

“Like I said before, ‘Charlie my man, get your lily-white ass over here, pronto’” the leader of the gang repeated.

Petey immediately spoke.

“Now boys, I think we were here first and he’s going to take our order. Everybody has to wait his turn” he repeated again in a soft, chiding voice.

With that, two of the gang members jumped to their feet and moved aggressively towards Petey.

“Petey! Get outta the way” came a shout from the hallway leading to the restroom.

Petey instinctively jumped over the counter and crouched down behind it. He pulled Charlie down with him.

Larry raised his twelve-gauge pump to hip level and with a thunderous roar, blasted a round of double o buckshot straight into the booth where the Firemen were

sitting. He pumped another cartridge into the chamber and fired again and so a third and fourth.

Four bodies and blood laden fragments of flesh were strewn about the floor, throughout the shattered booth, and over the spattered walls.

The room remained silent for several seconds as the smell of gun smoke quaffed through the air.

Then, Larry's voice shattered the quiet.

"Petey, ya can come out now. Ya gotta see how good I did"

Petey and Charlie warily poked their heads up from behind the counter.

"How'd I do?" Larry shouted with a broad grin.

No one replied.

He stood stone-still with the smoking gun draping by his side He then proceeded to the counter, disassembled the sawed-off shotgun and put it back in the satchel. He went to the far end of the counter beyond where the carnage was lying and sat down.

“Petey, get over here!” he commanded.

Petey obeyed.

He sat down on the stool next to Larry. A slight grin spread over his face.

“Looks like you’ve come over to my way of thinkin’ huh Petey?” Larry said in a self-satisfied tone.

“What do you mean?” asked Petey.

“I kinda remember you gettin’ so worked up that you was throwin’ up all over ya self when we chopped up that first guy back in my garage.”

Larry then slightly turned on the stool and pointed to the shattered bodies of the Firemen lying throughout the adjacent booth.

“It don’t seem to be botherin’ you that much this time. As a matter of fact, that little smile I’m seein’ on you makes me think you’re kinda beginnin’ to appreciate my work.”

Larry then looked Charlie straight in the eye and spoke.

“Two eggs over light, home fries, rye toast, and a coffee.”

There was a brief silence.

Then Petey spoke.

“Me too!”

THE END.