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CITY OF MARGINS

Written by **William Boyle**
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**CITY
OF
MARGINS**

WILLIAM BOYLE



NO EXIT PRESS

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Dedicated to the memory of David Berman.
Thank you for the songs and poems.



From a distance,
The city looks like broken glass.

– Joe Bolton, ‘Little Testament’

I’m the fire, I’m the fire’s reflection
I’m just a constant warning to take the other direction.

– Jim Carroll, ‘City Drops into the Night’

She believed that all life from the womb to the grave was a coincidence. She knew that in the womb it was indubitably coincidence; in fact, everything about the womb was coincidence, from what went in it to what came out of it. She believed in coincidence as a pilot believes in air. He doesn't see it, but he's flying many tons of steel on it, so it must be there.



Her whole life was a series of coincidences, one stumbling after another.

– Chester Himes, *Pinktoes*



Prologue

July
1991
Southern Brooklyn



Donnie Parascandolo

‘I was with Suzy when it happened,’ Donnie Parascandolo says, stepping away from the kitchen counter, his beer getting warm in his hand. ‘I’m telling you. I don’t know what it is about this broad. She loves the fights. She loves grilled cheeses. She loves Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. She’s around when weird things happen.’

‘No shit she loves Rudolph,’ Sottile says from the couch, thumping his chest. ‘I love Rudolph.’

‘You love Rudolph?’ Pags says, moving over to the fridge for another Bud.

‘Look at him,’ Donnie says. ‘Of course he loves Rudolph. He probably jerks off to Rudolph. You jerk off to Rudolph, Sottile?’

‘I tried once,’ Sottile says without hesitation. ‘Didn’t do nothing for me.’

They all laugh.

They’re in Donnie’s living room. It’s a big house for a guy by himself. He had a family once, a wife and a kid. Donna was his wife. Donnie and Donna. Perfect. They had a wall plaque with their names on it, a match made in guinea heaven. And Gabe was their kid. Donna came up with the name Gabe. Always sounded to Donnie like the name of a first baseman who batted .232, hit about six homers, drove in forty-something runs, but kept his job because he was good with a glove. Gabe was a troubled kid. Moody. His second year of high school, a little over a year before, he offed himself. Nothing too bad happened

that Donnie knew of to prompt it. It was in Gabe's blood, the depression or whatever. Hanged himself in the cellar from a water pipe. Donna found him. They lasted about two months after the funeral and then got a divorce.

Donna still lives in the neighborhood, over on Eighty-Fourth Street. She said she didn't want anything from him, money-wise. She just wanted to try to start over. She took her records – she loved her records – and a few boxes of Gabe's stuff and moved into a small apartment she rented from some lady who used to play pinochle with her mother. He let it go. What else could he do? Other than the stuff Donna claimed – some of Gabe's books, baseball cards, toys from when he was a little kid, and even some of his clothes – Gabe's room is just as he left it. Donnie keeps the door shut and never goes in there.

He's been on-again off-again with Suzy for about six months now. Nothing serious. No way he'll ever let her move in. At forty-four and with a dead kid in his rearview, he doesn't mind the feeling of being free. He likes being a cop okay. He likes drinking with Sottile and Pags. He likes eating Chinese food and pizza and buttered rolls every meal. Truth is, he likes not having to worry about a kid anymore. Having a kid meant stress. School, doctors, a million expenses. Never mind the fact that you've got the pain of another existence on your hands. He learned that the hard way with Gabe.

Sottile and Pags don't have kids, thank Christ. They never fell down that hole. Well, Sottile did briefly. Back before Donnie knew him. His baby was born dead. The wife died not long after. Donnie doesn't know what her name was. Sottile didn't feel like he had anything in common with Donnie, being that his kid never lived. Pags was allergic to getting too close to women. That makes it easier for Donnie to be around these guys. They were married with kids, he'd have to choke on his

emotions over Gabe. He doesn't talk about that stuff, but it's there in his memory. Gabe as a baby in his arms, sleeping on his chest, playing around on the living room floor, dressed like an elf for Christmas. Can't just wipe it all away.

Now he's got his routine with Sottile and Pags. There's the job, number one. There's going to Blue Sticks Bar or the Wrong Number after they get off or coming over here to drink and watch the Yanks. And then there's the side work they do for Big Time Tommy Ficalora. Donnie's been into this from the start, but it's amped up since Gabe's death. Tommy is the head of one of the neighborhood crews. He likes having cops and ex-cops on his payroll. They mostly do strong-arm stuff for him, collections and whatnot. Sometimes they transport shit. Sometimes they get rid of things that need to get gotten rid of. Sometimes they do real dirty work. Donnie's good at that, breaking an arm, choking a guy out, going further when it's mandated. He has no trouble reconciling being crooked and being police. Pretty much every cop he knows is crooked in some way. They all take bribes or steal outright. Most take payoffs for protection. Some are into insurance fraud, burning bars down for the mob, that kind of shit. The ones who have wives cheat on them or beat them, though Donnie was never one of those. At least one he knows is into raping hookers, and nobody will pinch the crazy fuck over it. Many work for the opposition in their spare time, and many work for the opposition while they're on the clock. They're bad a million ways. They betray any ethics they once had. It's the culture.

Anyhow, comes down to it, Donnie doesn't mind having this big house to himself these days. After Donna split, he thought he might sell it and get a small apartment like she did, but he likes wandering around, opening and closing doors, sleeping in different rooms, looking out windows for different angles on

the sidewalk and the P.S. 101 schoolyard across the street. He just doesn't go in the cellar or Gabe's room.

'You were saying?' Sottile says.

'I was saying what?' Donnie says.

'You were telling us about something that happened that Suzy was there for.'

'Shit, that's right.' Donnie pounds the rest of his beer and rips a loud belch.

Pags claps, his can thunking against his palm. He's back on the couch next to Sottile. The TV's on behind them, the sound low, the game coming back from commercial. It's the bottom of the tenth. The Yanks are trying to finish up a close one against the Angels.

'Let's watch this and then I'll tell you,' Donnie says. He goes over to the fridge for another beer. He opens the door. It's a sad scene in the fridge. Six Buds left. A thing of olives from Pastosa. Some Parmesan cheese. A quarter of a roast beef sandwich. Yesterday's container of lo mein leaking, leaving brown smudges on the shelf. He pops the beer and slams the door shut. He joins Sottile and Pags on the couch.

The Yanks are taking Howe out and putting Farr in.

'Now?' Sottile says.

'Okay,' Donnie says. 'We're just sitting at Lombardo's. I've got the veal. Suzy's got the fish. We're having a little wine.'

'That's when he comes in?'

'Fucking Dunbar. Just struts into the joint. He's got a nice-looking broad on his arm.'

'So, what's he say?' Pags says.

'He says, 'Parascandolo, you clean up nice.' Then he turns to Suzy, and he says, 'How much is he paying you? It's not enough.' He laughs his ass off.'

'You ignore him?'

'I say, 'Good evening, Captain.' Something real polite like that.'

'Tuck your dick between your legs.'

'Fuck am I supposed to do?'

The game's back on. Donnie pounds the arm of the couch. Yanks need one. *Come on.*

'So, that's it?' Sottile says.

'That's just the start,' Donnie says.

'What's the rest?'

'Wait, wait. He's got it. Two down here.'

'Jesus Christ, you're really dragging this out.'

Farr gets the outs. Donnie stands up, puts the beer on his TV table next to the videotapes he has out from Wolfman's. *Pacific Heights* and *Cobra* and *Young Guns II* again. He rents the same movies a lot.

'Okay,' Pags says.

'The rest is I go into the can after dessert, Dunbar's in there pissing. He tells me he knows how I feel about him, how youse two feel about him, how all the white cops in the department feel about him. That's what he says. 'All the white cops.' We're all white cops.'

'So, you grew some balls and told him to go shave Sharpton's bush, or what?'

'I said, 'I'm a fair guy. I give everyone a fair shake.' He says to me, 'You think you're hot shit. You think you're Stallone.'"

'You do resemble Sly. But a more washed-up version. Sly would have to let himself go for years to play you in a movie.'

'Fuck you,' Donnie says, but he's laughing about it. Sottile and Pags kid him about his looks a lot. He's a little washed-up, sure, but he's a handsome bastard. Sottile and Pags are Dennis Franz type motherfuckers, donut-bellies, the kind of guys who have pit stains and bristly mustaches decorated with

crumbs and wear boxers that smell like they've been washed in a corned beef bath.

'Back to Captain Dunbar, come on,' Sottile says.

'So Dunbar jabs his finger against my chest. His eyes are all bloodshot. He looks like Yaphet Kotto. I can tell he's a few drinks in.'

'Sly and Yaphet Kotto,' Sottile says. 'Showdown in the can. Tension's high.'

'Who's Yaphet Kotto?' Pags asks.

'You don't know Yaphet Kotto? He's from *Alien* and *Midnight Run*.'

Pags nodding now.

Donnie continues: 'He says to me, 'I know you've had it tough the last year, but you better get your shit together or you'll be washing windshields on a street corner somewhere.' Then he does this – if I may say so – *offensive* Italian voice: 'Capisce?'

'No shit,' Pags says.

'Hand to God,' Donnie says.

'This guy's got stones. What'd you say?'

'I grab his forearm as he's about to jab my chest again. I say, 'Have a good night, Captain Dunbar,' and I give him this big shit-eating grin.'

'Cool and collected,' Pags says. 'I bet that drove him wild.'

'You're something, I'll give you that,' Sottile says.

Donnie gets up and goes over by the TV. He leans down to shut it off just as the news comes screaming on. He pauses because the woman behind the desk is the one he likes and she's wearing a red dress tonight and has on murder-red lipstick. But then she's gone and some reporter in a trench coat is at a crime scene somewhere, standing in front of a blinking traffic light. Donnie twists the knob to off.

He roams over to the window behind the TV and pushes back the curtains. It was up to him, he wouldn't have curtains like this. He'd have blinds or nothing at all. These curtains, his mother made. They're papery and frail. He won't take them down because they're hers but also because he doesn't give enough of a shit to put in the effort.

He's looking at the schoolyard across the street now. A light hangs next to the basketball hoop and casts out a cone of brightness. He sees chalk graffiti on the blacktop. He's thinking it looks like a sad painting. The darkness all around, the half-busted hoop, the circle of light, the stillness.

Just then he sees little Antonina Divino emerge from the darkness. Well, she used to be little. She lives around the corner with her father, Sonny, and her mother, Josephine. Donnie used to watch her do laps around the block on her bike. See her with her Hula-Hoop in the schoolyard or playing hopscotch with her friends. Cute kid. Always full of energy. Gotta be fourteen, fifteen now, wearing nothing but a white bra and pink shorts. Laughing. Her brown hair draped over her neck. He can't imagine what he's seeing is real. He's thinking maybe she's on drugs. He's about to call Sottile and Pags over.

That's when Mikey Baldini steps out of the darkness and wraps his arms around Antonina. Mikey's old man is Giuseppe, who's in the hole to Big Time Tommy for twenty-five large. On the docket for tomorrow, by pure chance, is a visit to Giuseppe, Big Time Tommy saying it's time to kneecap the guy if need be. A kneecapping's the beginning. Then both arms get busted. Then, it comes to it, the guy goes for a swim. Donnie would just as soon skip steps one and two. Giuseppe's a pathetic piece of shit. And look at his kid out there. A fucking freak. Donnie only knows him from a distance. Back from his first semester of college upstate with those things, those plugs,

in his ears, and a plain black line tattooed on his chin – fuck’s that all about? Good-looking once maybe, in his Our Lady of the Narrows uniform, but now he looks like a real scumbag. His hair all knotted up. Wearing a dirty hoodie. A kid like this, he’s scoring with little Antonina? To mention nothing of the fact that she isn’t of age.

‘What’s going on?’ Sottile says, as Donnie charges into the empty bedroom at the back of the house. Donnie ignores him and grabs the Louisville Slugger he keeps behind the dresser.

‘What’d you see?’ Pags asks.

‘Jesus Christ.’ Sottile gets up reluctantly. ‘I’m trying to tie one on here.’

‘Antonina from around the block,’ Donnie explains. ‘She’s fifteen, tops. Giuseppe Baldini’s son’s there. He’s looking like he’s about ready to fuck her on the concrete under the basketball hoop.’

‘No shit,’ Sottile says.

‘Let’s go,’ Pags says.

They’re out the front door now, Donnie leading the way, the bat held at his side, Sottile and Pags fanned out behind him. As they cross the street and pass behind a parked van, they head for the main entrance to the schoolyard on the corner.

Donnie can see through the chain link. Mikey’s kissing Antonina’s neck. His hands are on her hips. He looks up at the sound of their feet. Antonina does, too.

The three men enter through the gate. They’re in a dark stretch of the schoolyard now.

‘Who’s there?’ Antonina says.

‘Don’t move,’ Donnie says.

‘What the fuck?’ Mikey says.

Donnie comes out in the light, Sottile and Pags at his side. ‘Step away from the girl. Put your hands up.’

Mikey looks like he's about to shit himself, probably over the presence of the bat.

Antonina recognizes Donnie. 'Mr Parascandolo,' she says, her arms across her chest now. 'It's okay. He's my friend.'

'This is your friend?' Donnie says to her. 'How old's your friend? You're what, fifteen? He's eighteen, nineteen, right? That ain't kosher.'

'Who are these guys?' Mikey says.

'You don't know me?' Donnie says.

'They're cops,' Antonina says to Mikey. And then to Donnie: 'Leave him alone, please. We were just having fun.'

'He give you something?' Donnie asks.

'What do you mean?'

'You on drugs?'

'Mr P, I don't do drugs.'

'You're in school at Kearney, right?'

'Right.'

'This is what they teach you there? Go ball the first freak who comes along? Look at this prick.'

Donnie sees Mikey's face in full now. That black vertical line tattoo from the bottom of his lip to the bottom of his chin is surrounded by little black dots.

'What's that tattoo all about?' he asks the kid.

Mikey jumps in, his voice wavering: 'I got to be friends with some crust punks up in New Paltz. They did it for me. Looks badass.' He's loosening up, thinking maybe the bat's just for show.

'Hell's a crust punk?' Donnie says. 'Kid's lost his goddamn marbles. I'm gonna call you Chin from now on. And what's that junkyard shit in your ears all about?'

Mikey shrugs, thumbs the black plugs that have stretched his earlobes to the size of nickels.

‘He likes it,’ Donnie says, miming the voice of the kid from the Life cereal commercials. Pags and Sottile laugh.

This Mikey, this piece-of-shit freak right in front of him who’d never be mistaken for a happy-go-lucky kid in a cereal commercial, takes a bottle of MD 20/20 from the pocket of his hoodie, unscrews the cap, and slugs from it. A healthy three-, four-second slug. This bum, drinking his bum wine, he’s alive and well and Gabe’s gone forever – that’s what Donnie’s thinking a few beers in.

Donnie, keeping the bat at his side, goes over and grabs the MD 20/20 from Mikey.

‘You want some?’ Mikey asks. ‘Have some. I’m in a sharing mood.’

‘A smart guy,’ Donnie says over his shoulder to Pags and Sottile.

‘Real smart, seems like,’ Pags says.

Donnie looks down at the bottle. Red Grape Wine flavor. He’s had MD 20/20 a handful of times, sure, but only the Orange Jubilee and Peaches & Cream. Thunderbird used to be his poison when he was coming up. He flicks off the cap and takes a long swig. Then he brings it over and passes it to Pags, who takes a quick hit and passes it to Sottile, who hesitates, wiping the mouth of the bottle with his sleeve before nipping at it like it’s Dom Perignon.

‘You been drinking this?’ Donnie asks Antonina. ‘He’s been giving this to you?’

‘No,’ Antonina says.

Donnie raises the bat across his chest. ‘You been feeding bum wine to a fifteen-year-old girl?’ he asks Mikey.

‘Fifteen?’ Mikey says. ‘I thought she was sixteen, I swear.’

Donnie gets the bottle back from Sottile. He guzzles it, drinking what’s left. He belches and chucks the bottle over his

shoulder. The glass shatters against the concrete over by the chain link fence behind the basketball hoop.

Mikey gulps. He's sweating.

'Just let us go,' Antonina says.

'Where's your shirt?' Donnie asks.

'Right over there,' she says, pointing into the dark.

'Go get it. You want the whole neighborhood to think you're a little puttana?'

Antonina keeps her arms crossed over her chest and rushes toward the building. Donnie can make out her movements. Only barely. She's by a dark doorway, reaching down, picking up a shirt. She slips it on. She comes back. Her shirt's pink, and it says *ASTROLAND* in white script.

'Your folks know where you are?' Donnie says to Antonina. She shakes her head.

'Maybe I should go over and talk to your dad. I bet he'd like to know what you're doing out here.'

'Please don't. Please put the bat down. Mikey's nice.'

'I'm scaring you, huh? Maybe you need some scaring.'

'Donnie,' Sottile says, 'let her go. She's a kid.'

'And what about *him*?' Donnie says, stepping closer to Mikey with the bat out. 'He's in college. Mr Fucking Chin. He's got coward blood running in his veins, let me tell you.'

He's talking about Mikey's old man, the degenerate, but he doesn't say it outright. Mikey doesn't know Donnie, doesn't know he does side work for Big Time Tommy, maybe doesn't even know how deep in shit Giuseppe is.

'Look, Mr Parascandolo,' Antonina says, level-headed. 'It was my idea for Mikey to come here. I thought the schoolyard would be dark and quiet. I snuck out to meet him. I was stupid. It was stupid.'

'It *was* stupid,' Donnie says. 'Very stupid.'

‘We’re being respectful. We’re not giving you any trouble. Just let us go.’

‘Let’s just go, yeah,’ Sottile says. ‘This is over.’

Donnie looks at Pags. ‘What do you think?’

‘It’s not right, that’s for sure,’ Pags says. ‘The wine. The shit in his ears. He’s too old for her, I agree about that.’

Donnie steps closer to Antonina. ‘A girl like you just don’t know how to use your head, and that’s a shame. You’re young. You got a lot of years ahead of you for mistakes. You should *think*. Next time you might not encounter cops nice like us.’

‘I’ll think,’ she says.

Donnie turns his focus back to Mikey. ‘You shouldn’t have come here, you know that, right?’

Mikey nods, staggers a bit. He’s maybe a little drunk off that bum wine.

‘You heard me?’ Donnie continues. ‘You shouldn’t be with a girl like this. You know that, right? She’s too young. She’s got decent parents.’

Another nod.

‘Next time you don’t have the luck to bump into cops like us, I can assure you of that. You’ll be handcuffed and locked up. You fuck a fifteen-year-old, you’re a sex offender.’ Donnie pauses. ‘But maybe you don’t give a shit. And maybe you don’t give a shit for cops. Maybe you and your ‘crust punk’ friends spit on cops? Huh? That’s what you do?’ He mimes spitting on the ground. ‘Fucking pigs,’ I can see you saying it now.’

Donnie likes seeing the fear in Mikey’s eyes. He likes the idea that the kid started out one place, thinking he was gonna just score a piece of pussy, and that he’s ending up here, practically shitting his pants, tuned down totally by a tough guy with a shield behind him. Donnie feels as good as he’s felt in a long fucking time. Pags is riding the vibe, too. Throwing

a fright into a freak like this. Good old-fashioned fun. Sottile, not so much. But that's okay. Sottile's maybe a little bit too nice, a little bit too soft, but that's one of the things Donnie likes about him. Sometimes it's good to have a fat, soft angel on one shoulder to keep you out of too much trouble.

'Come on,' Sottile says, reaching out and prodding Donnie in the ribs. 'We're all finished here.'

Antonina gives a look of relief, like with Sottile there it's possible they'll get out of this soon.

Maybe, Donnie's thinking, he should give the girl more shit. 'You were gonna let this punk screw you, weren't you?' Donnie says to her.

Antonina knows better than to respond at this point.

When Mikey opens his mouth and starts to talk, Donnie instinctively lifts the bat one-handed and cracks Mikey in the side of the head with it.

Mikey drops to his knees, one hand pressed over his ear, the fingers extended out over his temple and forehead, the other hand on the concrete, keeping him up. There's some blood showing in his hair. Donnie clocked him good.

'Jesus Christ,' Sottile says.

Antonina goes over and puts her hand on Mikey's back. Donnie looks at her. Her face is saying a million things, but she can't make words. She's got fear and regret in her eyes.

'You okay?' she finally asks Mikey.

'You learned something tonight,' Donnie says to Mikey. 'What not to do. How not to be. Straighten up before it's too late.'

'That was fucked, Donnie,' Sottile says.

Donnie snaps back at Sottile: 'You got a bad streak of limp-wrist in you, you know that?'

'Mikey, you okay?' Antonina asks again.

Mikey's still on his knees, wincing, his eyes squeezed shut.

‘He’ll survive,’ Donnie says. He turns and leads the way out of the schoolyard, Pags and Sottile fast on his heels, leaving Antonina huddled over Mikey. ‘Let’s go to the Wrong Number,’ he says to Pags and Sottile.

‘Sure thing,’ Pags says, laughing. ‘That was fucking funny, Donnie, you playing Whac-A-Mole with that kid’s melon. Maybe you knocked some smarts into him.’

‘Fucking idiots,’ Donnie says, thinking about Mikey’s face tattoo, his stretched earlobes, his dirty hoodie, his crust punk pals or whatever, and thinking about his arms around little Antonina Divino. They got doom ahead of them, he knows that much. ‘I could use about ten million beers.’

Blue Sticks, their other main haunt, is a cop bar, but the Wrong Number is just a plain old neighborhood dive. It’s where Donnie met Suzy. He took to spending more and more time hiding out there after Gabe died and Donna left. It’s only a few blocks from his house.

When they show up at the Wrong Number now, he, Pags, and Sottile stroll in, triumphant-seeming, as if they’ve just won a softball game in clutch fashion. Donnie sets his bat in the corner like it’s an umbrella.

Maddie, the bartender, is crumpled on a stool near the register, smoking up a storm. She’s wiry and grizzled, wearing a wool hat even though it’s not cold, drinking her gin out of an empty black olive can, a pack of unfiltered Pall Malls in the breast pocket of her bowling shirt. Three other old bastards sit at the bar with Buds. It’s dark except for the neon beer lights and the dull bulbs dangling from loose sockets in the ceiling. The TV’s showing the news, a white line zipping up and down the screen. The sound of the reporters babbling on is the only noise in the joint.

‘What’d you fucks do, rescue a cat from a tree?’ Maddie says, grinning behind her cigarette.

‘That’s firemen,’ Pags says.

‘We just did some off-the-books etiquette training,’ Donnie says, bellying up to the bar. ‘Give us three shots of Jack and three Buds.’

Pags and Sottile settle on stools on either side of him.

Maddie moves slowly but gathers their beers and then pours their shots in glasses that Donnie can only assume the best about.

Donnie raises his shot glass and waits for Pags and Sottile to lift theirs. ‘Chin-chin,’ he says, tapping their glasses and then putting back the shot. He follows it with a quick pull from his beer.

Pags and Sottile take their sweet time with the shots.

‘You see what I did there?’ Donnie says. ‘Chin-chin’ in honor of our good friend Chin out there.’

‘You think that’s like a sex thing, that tattoo?’ Pags asks.

‘Fuck you talking about?’ Donnie says. ‘A sex thing how?’

‘I don’t know. Like witch shit. He’s upstate with those hippies doing god-knows-what. They’re maybe fucking goats in the woods, you know?’

Donnie laughs, finally plopping down on his own stool. ‘That’s just drunk assholes, getting their kicks, waking up to realize they look like monsters. Where you gonna get a job with that shit on your face?’

‘And what’s with the ears? Must fuck up your ears pretty good to jam those things in there.’

‘Maybe he gets fucked through his big earholes,’ Donnie says.

They laugh.

‘You didn’t have to whack him like that,’ Sottile says.



‘I’m getting sick of your negativity,’ Donnie says, flashing a smile. ‘Besides, it’s only a matter of time before that kid winds up in the same spot his old man’s in. Speaking of which, consider what we did a warm-up for tomorrow with Giuseppe.’

Donnie motions for Maddie to refill their shot glasses. She comes back with the bottle of Jack. Donnie tosses a couple of twenties on the bar. Maddie pours the shots and takes money for the two rounds, leaving the change piled there in front of him. Donnie loves to see money sitting on a bar. His uncle Pencil Pat – skinny as a rail, the smooth-dressing fuck – used to do that at his hangout, the Cockroach Inn. Throw down a few bills and just let the bartender pull from it as he needed to pay for drinks. Something about it makes Donnie feel on top of things.

‘Chin-chin,’ he says again, downing the second shot. Pags and Sottile follow suit.

On the TV, the news winds down. The WPIX station identification bumper comes on the screen. Donnie zones out looking at it, the two 1s looking like the Twin Towers wrapped in a circle. It’s hypnotic as fuck. Designed that way, probably. Maybe that’s all TV is. Hypnotism.

Pags and Sottile are watching the tube now too, nursing their beers.

A commercial plays for Lucille Roberts. Broads in spandex working out. Next is an old-timer in stupid glasses pouring cereal into a bowl, saying something Donnie can’t make out. This one’s for Total cereal.

Donnie’s not even sure what time it is. Maybe eleven. There’s no clock on the wall in the Wrong Number, which is a good thing. Maddie locks up at some point, but there are nights she just doesn’t close. Some guys, they sleep right there at the bar or in a booth or they just keep drinking all night. Maybe



tonight will be one of those nights for him, Pags, and Sottile. They're not on the job tomorrow. Their only obligation is the Giuseppe thing for Big Time Tommy.

Cheers comes on now. There it is, confirmed. Eleven o'clock. Still early. Donnie angles his head and watches for a couple of minutes. He likes that Kirstie Alley.

'I wish they showed nothing but the Lucille Roberts commercial on a loop,' Sottile says. 'I could watch it my whole life. Especially that one chick on the exercise machine.'

'One day soon they'll be showing pornos on regular TV,' Pags says. 'Mark my words.'

'I'll take Rebecca,' Donnie says.

'Who?' Sottile says.

Donnie points up at the screen. Kirstie Alley in a blue dress, her hair over her shoulders, standing at the bottom of the front steps in *Cheers* and laying into Sam Malone about something.

'I'm a Diane guy,' Sottile says.

'Course you are.'

More shots, backed by another round of beers. They're settling into something good here. Donnie's feeling loose-limbed, relaxed.

But that third shot sparks an idea.

'We should go get him now,' Donnie says.

'Go get who?' Pags says.

'I got my load on,' Sottile says. 'Let's sit still for a sec, huh?'

Donnie whispers to them, not that Maddie can hear him or even gives a shit what they're talking about: 'We should go get Giuseppe now. Two-to-one odds he's playing cards with Pete Wang in the back room at Augie's.'

'You think?' Pags asks.

'He's not home with his wife, no way. It's not that late. He's in the hole to Big Time Tommy, he's not laying bets over at the

club. Where else is he gonna go? You were with me last week when we were on his tail. Trust me. He's playing cards with Pete Wang.'

'He's got no dough, how's he get in a game with Wang?' Sottile asks.

'Always with the fucking questions.' Donnie sucks down his third beer and the rest of Pags's. He pushes what remains of the money to the edge of the bar. A good tip for grizzled old Maddie with her gin in an olive can and her unfiltered Pall Malls. He stands and leads the charge out of the Wrong Number, grabbing his bat as they exit.

Sottile protests the whole way, insisting he was just starting to feel good, that maybe they should put their energy into going to pick up some streetwalkers in Coney.

Augie's is a couple of avenues over, a corner deli with a back room where owner Pete Wang holds card games a few nights a week. Donnie doesn't know shit about cards. Maybe it's poker or blackjack or fucking Go Fish they play.

But Sottile's question was legit: If Giuseppe's scratched out, how's he pay into the game?

Still, Donnie's banking on Giuseppe's presence at Augie's. These degenerate fucks always find a way. Donnie's seen enough of them to know. He's seen them on the job, and he's seen them in his work for Big Time Tommy. If there's a ticket on a train that'll take them lower, they'll hop the turnstile to board. As his old man used to say, 'A chi vuole, non mancano modi.' *Where there's a will, there's a way.* Giuseppe's wife – Rosemarie's her name – she's probably sitting at home, crouched at the kitchen table, praying her rosary. Her no-good husband's out gambling away whatever they've got, and her fuck-up of a son's trying to throw a lay on a girl probably just got out of her training bra.

Augie's is dark when they get there, but that doesn't mean

anything. They stand on the opposite corner, leaning against the brick wall of a hair salon.

‘So, we do what?’ Sottile asks. ‘Stand here and wait? Or storm in?’

Donnie clanks his bat against the sidewalk. ‘Let me think.’

What they wind up doing is waiting there, Sottile getting impatient, saying it’d be nice if they’d at least had the presence of mind to bring along a fifth of Jack. Donnie’s plan is to pounce on Giuseppe as soon as he comes out of Augie’s, bring him back to the house, throw him in the trunk of his Ford Tempo, and take him out to the Marine Parkway Bridge. Forget about kneecapping the pathetic shit. Toss him straight in the drink, that’s what Donnie’s thinking. Get this headache off his hands. Give that punk kid Mikey a dead dad to deal with and a debt to inherit. He wants to take something from somebody the way Gabe was taken from him.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Sottile says.

‘Go home,’ Donnie says. ‘Take your tampon out and get your beauty sleep.’

Pags cracks up.

‘Funny,’ Sottile says.

It’s another half hour before Giuseppe comes staggering out the side door of Augie’s, his flat cap in his hand, his shoulders slouched. It’s the posture of a perpetual loser. Probably lights candles at the shrine of Our Lady of the Perpetual Loser, the mook. He’s got a three-day beard and dark circles under his eyes. Guy’s a math teacher in real life – he goes to work like this?

‘See?’ Donnie says. ‘I got a sixth sense.’

‘Now what?’ Pags says. ‘You swinging for the fences again?’

‘Follow me.’

Donnie rushes Giuseppe, leading with the bat. Pags and



Sottile scramble behind him. Donnie can hear the whiskey in the way they're walking.

Giuseppe sees him coming and drops to his knees, clasping his hat against his chest, his face full of panic. He knows who they are, of course. They've been around plenty before.

'Tell Big Time Tommy I'll pay in two weeks,' he calls out. 'Two weeks is all I need!'

Donnie arrives in front of him and reaches out with the bat, gently pressing it against the tip of Giuseppe's nose. Some beak this bum's got. Donnie's noticed it before, but up close it's more pronounced, more cock-eyed, more everything. Giuseppe closes his eyes, drops his hat to the ground.

'You're gonna get twenty-five large in two weeks?' Donnie asks.

Sottile's looking all around, up and down the avenue, at the closed riot gates of other storefronts, peeling back the shadows for faces. He doesn't like being out in the open with the guy like this, and maybe he's right.

'Get up,' Donnie says to Giuseppe.

They walk the few blocks to Donnie's house, Donnie prodding Giuseppe in the back with the bat whole way. They encounter two people, a guy in his twenties wearing headphones and another guy, in his forties or fifties, who seems half-loaded. Neither gives them or the bat a second look. Giuseppe tries to talk, tries to finagle his way out of the trouble he's in, tries to make promises, but every time he opens his mouth Donnie jabs him harder.

The schoolyard across the street is empty now. Antonina's home in her bed, no doubt. Donnie wonders about Mikey – did he have to go to the hospital, or is he back home with his mother, worried about old Giuseppe here?

Donnie's Ford Tempo is parked at the end of his dark



driveway. They get in, Donnie in the back with the bat across his lap and Giuseppe huddled next to him, Pags behind the wheel, Sottile in the passenger seat, scooting it in reverse until it bumps Giuseppe's knees. The car reeks of booze.

'So, where we going?' Pags says, turning down the visor and finding the key next to a prayer card from Gabe's funeral Donnie keeps taped there. Pags knows the score. He got right in the driver's seat without questioning anything.

'Drive like you're going to Riis Park,' Donnie says.

Pags nods and starts the car. He knows.

Donnie sets the bat down between his legs. He keeps a few things in the car for times like this. One is a roll of duct tape. He's thinking he should wrap up Giuseppe's legs and hands, slap a piece across his mouth. But then he thinks better of it. The guy's taped up like that, no way it looks like he jumped, which is the preferable outcome here.

Pags backs out of the driveway slowly, nearly scraping the car against the side of the house.

'What're you gonna do with me?' Giuseppe asks.

'You'll see,' Donnie says.

'I'll get the dough, I swear.'

Pags has them in the street now, closer than he should be to a parked car. Donnie knows the car. A Citation. It's Mr Papi's from up the block. The lights on the Tempo aren't even on. Donnie scolds Pags, tells him to get his shit together. Pags snaps the lights on. Sottile has fallen asleep, and he's sawing wood big time.

They make a right off the block, another right at Twenty-Fourth Avenue, a left at the light on Cropsey, and then hop on the Belt Parkway, eastbound. No traffic at all, just the regular assholes going ninety.

They get off at the Flatbush Avenue South exit, headed

for the Rockaways. The drive isn't long, fifteen minutes or less under normal circumstances, but it takes them closer to twenty-five because Pags is going slower than usual, drifting onto the shoulder the whole time. They're not afraid of getting stopped.

'The bridge?' Giuseppe asks. 'I'm not a good swimmer. Please.'

'Chi ha fatto il male, faccia la penitenza,' Donnie says, slurring his words, again summoning his old man, who had a proverb for everything. "You make your bed, you gotta lie in it."

'I'm a good man,' Giuseppe says. 'I got a family. I'm a teacher. I got summer school. You can't do this.'

'You're a good man? My balls are good men.' Donnie laughs. 'You raised a son ain't worth shit, let me tell you that much.'

Giuseppe looks confused. 'What do you know from my son?' he asks, even more desperate now. He's reading this as a threat against his family. 'You leave my son out of it. And my wife. I owe the money, that's all. You do what you need to do to me, but you leave my family alone.'

Real noble all of a sudden, the stronzo.

They stop in the middle of the bridge on the eastern edge. No other cars at this hour. Donnie was thinking the bridge was higher, to be honest. Been a little while since he's been out here, and the last time he wasn't sober either. It's a vertical-lift bridge. In the raised position, it is higher. Regular like this, it's probably only fifty feet down to the water. Giuseppe survives, he survives. He doesn't, he doesn't. No loss either way. Donnie shrugs it off. Though the guy said he can't swim, so odds are good he sinks like a stone.

Donnie looks up at the towers of the bridge, bright in the moonlight. He looks out at the Verrazano in the distance. It

would've been a better option as far as height, that's for sure, but there's too much action there.

'Think about this,' Giuseppe says. 'You're cops, right? You're supposed to protect people like me.'

'You don't know us,' Donnie says.

Sottile's snoring fills the car.

Donnie acts fast. He orders Giuseppe out and follows him, the bat pressed against his back. He realizes the bat isn't his piece just about then. He wishes he had his piece. This few-second stretch, the guy makes a run for it, what's Donnie going to do? Get in the car and have Pags chase him down, which would be a pain at best and a mess at worst. But Giuseppe doesn't run. Donnie's guess is that Giuseppe's decided this is nothing but a threat. He thinks they're going to show him how close he came to dying, dangle him over the edge even, and then let him off with a final warning. The classic delusion that he'll get a stay of execution. Donnie would bet a million bucks he's thinking he'll straighten up starting tomorrow. No more gambling, family first. He's praying to God in his head, making all kinds of promises.

As Giuseppe gets close to the railing, he's about to say something else to Donnie, but Donnie uses the bat again to shove him forward as hard as he can. Giuseppe wavers and then goes over the railing, the top half of his body flopping forward, his hands looking for something to grab hold of. His legs are up in the air. It takes one more good push on Donnie's part to shake him fully loose, his hand bristling against the cheap fabric of Giuseppe's right pant leg, before the leg is over and the body is over and Giuseppe falls headfirst into Rockaway Inlet, screaming the whole way down. Donnie doesn't wait to see how he fairs. He gets back in the car and tells Pags to take him home, he's tired.