

Fish Farm

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Smashwords Edition

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Jack looked out the third floor window of his shabby walkup onto a cold, gray day. His thoughts mirrored his vision.

“How did it happen?” he thought to himself rhetorically. He knew but it was hard to accept without rage building within him.

He chased the thought away and continued to stare.

The relief was brief.

Again, it flooded his memory.

He thought back to that Wednesday morning. Dressed in his robe with coffee in hand, he had opened the door of his condo and reached for the paper. The two-inch type of the front page burned its message into his brain.

“TYRON COLLAPSES” - it read like a death notice. It was.

He turned and walked slowly back into his house with the paper in hand.

He'd heard rumors but there were always rumors - rumors of triumph and rumors of catastrophe - ever since he began working for Tyron. None of which ever came true, until now!

He sank back into the easy chair and began to read.

“Yesterday, at the close of trading Tyron, one of the largest corporations on the NYSE, declared bankruptcy. Investigations into the collapse have begun. Fraud by executives at Tyron is high on the list of causative factors leading to Tyron's downfall. Tyron's CEO, James Wheeler is suspected of funneling millions of dollars to his own accounts while altering records of company finances...”

It had to be at least two years now.

He mused to himself in amazement that he remembered word for word, after all this time, the text of that article.

With the flashback over, he reentered the present and continued his vacant stare.

Suddenly, the ring of the telephone startled him from his trance.

“Dad! Did you see the TV today?”

“No.”, he replied.

“Turn it on. They have the results of the trial.”

“O.K.” He hung up the phone and snapped on the TV.

“This latest news bulletin - James Wheeler, Hal Meter and several other high-ranking executives who have been found guilty in the collapse of Tyron have been sentenced today.

Mr. Wheeler who has been free on bail over the past two years has been sentenced to a ten thousand dollar fine and six months in jail. The others of those convicted received fines up to five thousand dollars and community service.

Judge Arthur Gavin instructed Mr. Wheeler to report to jail in two weeks

deferring to his attorney's request for time so that he may get his affairs in order.

Here comes John Hurley, Wheeler's lawyer now.

Mr. Hurley - what is your opinion of today's sentencing?"

"I think Judge Gavin was extremely fair. Justice prevailed. The judge's sentence speaks for itself. That's all I have to say. Thank you."

Jack rocked back in his chair and clicked off the TV. His stomach churned and he felt a sickness come over him.

"Six months and ten thousand dollars! Justice prevailed! Extremely fair!"

The words echoed over and over in his head and amplified upon each rebound.

The phone rang again.

"Some bullshit! Some bullshit! What do you think Dad?"

"Well, it's the way things go. 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 has always been this way. Maybe someday it may change but I'm not so sure unless someone makes it happen."

"You're right, Dad.

Have you thought about my idea of you moving in with us?"

You know how I hate 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 and Dave's offer, but I can't.

I know the area here is not the best but I'm okay. I just watch my step and it works out fine. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"But Dad..."

"Now, let's not talk about that any more.

How's the kids?"

"They're good. I'll call you tomorrow.

Bye Dad. I love you."

Jack put down the phone and reverted back to the memories and that vacant stare to which he had become so accustomed.

"Hey, Jack did you hear the rumor that's going around?" announced Mark as he peered through the open office door.

"What's it now, Mark?"

"Three thousand are biting the dust. By the end of the week!"

"Where did you hear that?"

"Ned, down in Human Resources, told me and he said he heard it from a couple of pretty good sources."

"Well, if that's true the tide is certainly getting higher. Two thousand last month and now another three! I wonder why?"

According to the annual report we're doing great. Revenues are up, profits are up and our stock price is on the rise."

"That's all true but I did see where a couple of the suits were selling pretty good amounts of stock."

"Yeah, I saw that too, but I also heard that both of Wheeler's daughters are

getting married and you know the receptions are not going to be held at the local VFW hall. They'll cost a bundle. That's probably why he's selling."

He remembered all of it like it was yesterday. At the time it was like a faint, distant clap of thunder warning of the approaching storm - an unheeded warning.

Jack's memory fast-forwarded. The tide of lay offs did indeed rise and as it rose, simultaneously, the stock price fell. Which moved more quickly, it was hard to tell.

At every round of lay off announcements, Jack anxiously awaited his notice. It never arrived and each time he felt a sigh of relief.

Then, Tuesday morning, July 8th, eight A.M. Bam! Right between the eyes!

A team of security guards stood at the door as Mark exited the building. He walked towards Jack's car as it entered the parking lot. He was carrying two large, plastic shopping bags, one in each hand. He nodded for Jack to pull over.

Jack stopped and rolled down the window.

"Go get your shit! The party's over."

"What's going on?"

"Didn't you listen to the radio this morning? Our stock fell by ninety percent in over night trading and this morning we declared bankruptcy. They're letting people in one by one to clean their desks. The Feds are up stairs right now.

Better go get in line to get your stuff", he then turned and continued walking towards his car.

Jack's thoughts continued to drift.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am. She put up one hell of a fight."

"Thanks Arnie, I appreciate your coming."

"I'm sorry Jack. I don't know what else to say."

"I understand. Thanks Ann."

The line stretched around the room and out into the hall of the funeral home.

Sally had lots of friends. She was the kind of person who was always there for others and now it was their turn and they were all there for her.

Jack drew in a deep breath through his nose and swallowed hard as he continued to greet the horde the well wishers.

Sally got sick about two months after he had lost his job at Tyron.

"It was a terrible time to get ill", he thought to himself but then again it's never a good time to get cancer.

"That's not what I meant!" he mentally chided himself.

No medical insurance, it disappeared with job. Then eight months of operations and chemo. The cancer consumed her and all that they had, which wasn't that much after the 401K collapsed with Tyron.

His memories rolled forward.

"Alright Dad. Do you think you have everything? Look around again just to be sure. Check the basement again."

"I'm sure. I can't take much with me anyway. It's only three rooms you know."

"Okay, grab the box and let's go."

Jack reached down and picked a large cardboard carton packed with pictures and a few books. Lying on the top was a large frame displaying military medals and decorations.

“Be careful. You don’t want to drop it.”

They walked through front the door out towards the car. Jack stopped about halfway there, turned and looked back at the house.

“Thirty-five years, gone in a flash”, he muttered and got into the car.

Then once again he lapsed back into reality.

“Oh shit”, he thought to himself.

“You can’t keep rolling this stuff over and over in your head. It’ll drive you crazy for sure.”

“Go out and get some air. Have a smoke and forget it”, he muttered to himself.

He stepped through the apartment doorway, closed the door and rattled the handle.

“Gotta make sure it’s locked, not that it would really make any difference”, he thought.

“If they want to get in, the lock will only slow them down for a couple of minutes. And besides, what’s there to steal?”

He proceeded down the winding stairs to the front of the building and over to the bench near the sidewalk. He drew a cigar from his pocket, unwrapped it, snipped the end and lit it.

As the first puff of smoke issued from his nose, he was for a second, back to the Club. A snap shot of the first fairway, with its lush green hue, flashed through his mind. It was a site he was never to see again. Its image faded as he exhaled with long, slow sigh.

“How ya doin’ Jack?” came a voice over the tap, tap, tap of the bouncing basketball on the adjacent playground.

“Not bad, Hal”, he replied unconvincingly.

“How about you?”

“Okay, for an old man I guess. The knee is acting up a little again. Other than that, not bad.”

Hal, a tall, light skinned black man with gray hair and slight limp sat down beside him.

“I guess it’s that old wound from Nam again. They never did get that piece of metal completely out.”

“Did you hear about Matty. They walked him down to the bank and made him cash his social security check and took the money.”

“What do you mean ‘Took the money’?”

“The dues! I thought I told you 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 from everybody. Matty didn’t pay so they marched him down to the bank and got the money out of him.”

“What’s this FPF stuff anyway?”

“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 me? He refused to

give anything. He's a pretty tough guy, an old Navy Seal 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 so he could put it out in time or the whole place woulda went up!"

"What happened after that?"

"Petey payin' dues like everybody else."

"Who are these guys?"

"A bunch of guys from the neighborhood here. Young guys you know.

They started their own gang - they call themselves the Firemen. They wear a little tat on the arm. It's a flame with the letters FM in it.

Petty crooks and dealers who decided this is an easy way to make money.

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 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 did you can be god damn sure that guy's gonna have some serious problems if you know what I mean."

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

"Any good news in there?"

"Yanks won three in a row. That's about it."

They continued to sit with Hal sporadically commenting on the items he was reading in the paper and Jack courteously responding.

Then, after an hour or so, with his cigar consumed to an inch beyond his lips, Jack arose.

"Well, that's about it for today. Gotta go up and get supper together.

See ya tomorrow."

The front door of the building closed behind him with its familiar squeal of metal on metal and he proceeded up the narrow stairs towards his apartment.

As he slid his hand up the banister his grasp weakened. There was something slippery on the banister, preventing a firm grasp. He looked closely in the dim shadow of the hallway. It looked like blood. He lifted his hand towards his face. It was blood. All over the hand rail and the steps.

He continued up the staircase trying to avoid stepping in the trickle that covered each step. He arrived at the second floor and moved down the hall toward the next flight. As he made the turn, he saw the blood stream leading through the open door of apartment 2-B.

He approached the door and carefully pushed it wide open with one hand not knowing what to expect. He cautiously peered in.

"Mrs. Murray?"

"Ellen?"

He carefully stepped over the blood trail and into the apartment.

In the kitchen he found her seated on the floor leaning against the cabinet door, bloodied and sobbing.

“What happened?”

“He...He...” she gasped.

“Who? What?”

“He came to rob me” she stammered.

“Are you hurt?”

Let me call the police.

Where’s the phone?”

“No! No! Don’t! He said if I did he’d be back to kill both Suzy and me.

Please don’t. I’m okay.”

With Jack’s help, she to lifted herself from the floor.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m okay.”

“Where did all this blood come from?” he asked as he looked for her wounds.

“From him.”

She got to her feet and hobbled over to a chair near the kitchen table.

“Would you give me a glass of water?”

Jack obliged.

“Now what exactly happened?”

“I was sitting right here, getting Suzy’s dinner ready. I was opening the can of cat food when I heard a noise at the front door. It was like a thud. I started to get up to see what was going on and suddenly there he was in the kitchen doorway.

A big guy, with plenty of tattoos holding a crowbar.

‘I need some cash. Whatta you got?’ he said.

I told him that I didn’t have any except what’s in that drawer.”

She pointed to the open drawer at the other side of the kitchen.

“He looked in the drawer. There was only about twenty-five dollars and some change in there. That got him real mad.

‘You got more than that’ he yelled.

I told him I didn’t but he didn’t believe me. I really didn’t.

Then, he went over and grabbed Suzy by the back of the neck and said ‘If you don’t tell me where the rest of it is this cat is history’ and then he turned on the gas stove and was bringing her over towards the flame.

When I saw that I guess I just snapped. I had the can lid on the table and I grabbed it and sliced it down his face and neck. The blood started pouring out and he dropped Suzy and the crowbar and grabbed his neck. I could see the blood was shooting through his fingers.

When he saw all that blood he yelled ‘Don’t you tell anybody or I’ll be back for both of you.’

Then, I guess he panicked because there was an awful lotta blood and he ran for the door and took off down the stairs.

There’s the crowbar over there.”

Jack looked over to where she was pointing to see the blood covered crowbar lying on the floor near the doorway.

“I gotta call the cops.”

A recorded voice issued for the phone “You have reached the police department for an emergency please press.....”

"If you do I'll tell them it never happened, so don't."

"He'll be back anyway, even if you don't call the police."

"Maybe not! Don't call", she replied in a quivering voice.

Jack lowered the phone from his ear. He knew this wasn't going to be the smartest thing he'd ever done but the look of terror on her face convinced him. He hung up the phone and helped to clean up the blood from the floor and the cabinet doors.

He had a hard time sleeping that night. Maybe he should have called the cops after all. If something else happened to the old lady, he'd be to blame. Then again, if he did call, like she said, she would deny everything, so what would be the point?

Chapter 2

"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'?"

"Well, the way I heard it, he was jumped by an up town gang and they cut him good. Almost ear to ear. He just made it to the hospital in time. Gave 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.

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 with a big bandage on his neck.

The 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."

"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?"

"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, 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 sat on the bench in silence, Jack puffing on his cigar and Hal staring into the distance.

"Did you ever hear of Patrick Henry?"

"Patrick who? Where does he live?"

"No. Patrick Henry was a famous patriot during the Revolutionary War. He

said 'United we stand, divided we fall'."

They both again sit silently.

"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."

There was a pause.

"Did you ever play Bocce, Hal?"

"No."

"How 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."

"And, Hal ask Petey to come too. Okay?"

"Sure."

The next day they met at the park.

"Hey, Hal you made it, and you brought Petey with you."

"Yeah, Jack this is Petey, Petey this is Jack" as they shook hands.

"You guy ready for some Bocce lessons?"

"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 the others played Pinochle on the picnic tables then they'd switch back and forth.

They used to let me play once in a while and that's how I learned. It was a lot fun. I even saved my money and bought a Bocce set. Here let me show you. It's kinda like bowling and horseshoes combined."

He took 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 and then he throws a second big ball and tries to get close as he can to the pallino. Then the next guy throws to try 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 began to play.

"Hal tells me you live over by him in the gray brick building."

"Yeah, been there for about three years now."

"How is it?"

"Are you kiddin'? It's like all the other places in this neighbor, for shit!

But everybody's gotta live somewhere and I guess this is it for us."

"How'd you wind up here?"

"I wound up broke, that's how. Not a pot to piss in."

"Hal told me that you were a Navy Seal during Nam. How long were you in

the service?"

" 'Bout eighteen years."

"And you didn't get a good pension?"

"That's a long story. A long sad story."

"We've got all afternoon."

"I don't even wanna talk about it."

He paused.

"Let Hal tell ya. He knows the whole thing."

Jack turned to Hal and saw him get an approving glance from Petey.

"When Petey was in Nam he had a commanding officer, well, they didn't see eye to eye about a lot of stuff."

"Stuff? What kind of stuff?"

"Treatment of civilians for one. One day a girl in the village that they secured came to Petey and told him the Lieutenant forced her into sex. He told her that otherwise her whole family would wind up being collateral damage, if you know what I mean. "

"Sure, I do."

"Well, then when Petey went to the Lieutenant and told him what he heard the guy threatened him.

You don't know Petey very well, but I do and he's not the kinda guy that's gonna back off, so he told the Lieutenant he was goin' higher up with this stuff."

He paused.

"And?"

"And then the Lieutenant went back to the girl and made her accuse Petey of forcin' her into the sex before he could report it on up."

"So what happened then?"

"I did three years in the brig and got kicked out of the service. That's what happened", Petey interjected.

"How?"

"Shay, that was the guy's name, he got the girl to testify against me and he got some of the guys in our company to say it was true too. From what I got later on, he told them 'If you don't go with me and say what I tell ya, you'll be the point man from here on out'.

You know what that means; you'll probably be a short timer. You'll probably be goin' home real soon, in a box. So some of them got scared real quick and they went with Shay and I got my three years."

He paused.

"And here's the bitch of it. 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? How did you wind up here?"

"When I got out of the service, well, kicked out, I of course, went lookin' for a job. 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! Never got a military pension, of course. They took my chances of that when they put me in the brig.

All I got is some social security and not even much of that.”

“Sounds like you really got a screwin’.”

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

“I kinda know what you mean.”

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

“Maybe not, but I’m not so sure”, replied Jack and they continued the Bocce.

“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 here spilling out our guts I think it’s your turn now.”

“Ain’t my turn. No use whinin’ ‘bout things gone by.”

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

“I guess. I showed you mine maybe you should show us yours Hal?”

“Well I suppose but ain’t a hellava 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.

Ma 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 and they were pretty poor.

Wasn’t no Visiting Nurse stuff either, not in those days.

After a while the money we were getting’ just wasn’t enough so she hadda get a job. She use ta lock him in the bedroom and go to work and hope for the best.”

“How about your brothers and sisters. 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 when to high school you were expected to play unless you were crippled. Everybody had to play. They’d won thirty-two games in a row when I got there and were state champs for five years straight.”

“So did you play?”

“Are you kiddin’? Two hundred and ten pounds, six foot two. Didn’t have much a choice.

Ma didn’t want me to play. She was always worried that I’d get seriously hurt and I could understand that.

Havin’ one person she loved bein’ a mess, was all she could bear. But she finally agreed to let me play and I did like it and 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 the high school from forty-five years ago.

When I got outta high school I had a bunch of college offers. I went 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 started college.”

He paused for a moment.

“Well, anyway, like I was sayin’. I got a scholarship to State. They called it a

scholarship but I kinda looked at it as 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 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. But believe it or not that was a pretty good job in my town and I guess I only got it cause I was kinda the local football hero."

"So you were a heavy equipment operator all your life?"

"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 the guy playin' in the pros."

Again he paused

"And so?"

"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?"

"He was a white guy."

"So then what?"

"I got a factory job. Worked there for forty years. The company got sold and the pension was sold off. 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?"

"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 by the government, so I'm hangin' in.

That's about it, man and here I am."

"It must really piss you off when you watch football today? Guys making millions."

"Born too soon I guess but that's the way it is. What can ya do?"

With the Bocce game completed they all walked home.

Chapter 3

"Bang! Bang!"

He slowly opened his eyes and glanced at the clock.

"One A.M. What the hell is going on?" he thought.

"Bang! Bang!"

It was the front door.

He meandered to the door and looked through the peep hole.

“Bang! Bang!”

Mrs. Murray continued to pound on the door.

He opened it as she was about to strike again.

“Please let me in”, she gasped.

“What’s the matter? What happened?”

She hurried over and slumped into the chair trying desperately to catch her breath.

“I think he’s dead! I know he’s dead!”

“Dead!

Who’s dead?”

“The man in my apartment.”

“In your apartment?”

“He’s the same man that broke in the last time. He still has a bandage on his neck.”

“How’s he dead?”

“About two hours ago I was in the kitchen and I heard the door bust open again like last time. He came right into the kitchen and said he was going to kill me and Suzy.

I told him, ‘Take what ever you want but don’t hurt us.

I didn’t tell anybody about what happened before.

I didn’t call the police like you said.’

Then he said, ‘But you might be tellin’ somebody down the road and if my homies find I been cut up by an old lady like you that ain’t gonna be good for my rep. I gotta make sure there’ll be no talkin’’. And then he came at he with his knife.

I ‘d been making tea for myself and I’d just poured the cup and it was still boiling hot. I just threw it at him. It hit him right in the face and he fell backwards and hit his head on the radiator.

Then he didn’t move. He just laid there.

I got a knife out of the drawer and sat by him in case he woke up. I probably should have just run out but I was so scared I didn’t really know what I was doing.

If he would have woke up I don’t know what I would have done.

But I sat there frozen for a good half hour and he never moved. I tried to see if he was breathing and he wasn’t.

I don’t what to do. If I call the police then what are ‘homies’ as he called them, going to do to me and Suzy?

What can I do? What can I do?”, she wailed.

“You stay here and let me go down and see. I’ll be right back. Give me the key.”

“Here’s the key but you don’t need it. The door’s pried wide open.”

He slowly walked to the floor below in measured, stealthy steps and cautiously peered into the apartment. He rounded the corner into the kitchen.

There he was. Lying there, face up, eyes closed, next to the radiator with a pool of blood radiating from the back of his head.

Jack bent down and put his hand on the chest of his tea stained shirt. It was cold and motionless.

He felt his wrist. It was cold and pulse less.

“Dead alright”, he thought out loud.

He heard the muted creak of a foot step in the hallway. Silence. Then another.

He slowly picked up the dead man’s knife from the floor beside him, pulled away from the body and backed into the shadows of the pantry.

Another creak came from the hallway. He carefully peered around the corner of the pantry door.

It was Mrs. Murray standing in the doorway with her hand over her mouth staring at the lifeless corpse on the floor.

“I thought I told you to stay upstairs.”

“I couldn’t. I was so afraid.”

She paused.

“What am I going to do?”

“What am I going to do?”, she repeated.

“I’m not sure but I know what you are not going to do”, he replied.

“You’re not going to call the cops. As soon as they come everybody will know what happened. When I say everybody, I mean everybody on the street including his boys and they won’t take too kindly to it.

If they find out the whole story, you won’t last too long.

Maybe it’ll look like an accident. It’ll look like you fell off the roof or maybe look like suicide, but in any case you’ll wind up like him. These guys have no trouble killing anybody that harms one of the gang or insults the gang’s honor, not even old ladies.

As a matter of fact, killing an old lady would probably give their reputation a boost. It would show that nobody, no matter who, can get off hurting one of them without paying the price.

I think they’d kill a baby if they thought it disrespected them.”

“What should I do?”, she again repeated nervously.

There was silence.

“Well, we can’t just leave him laying here on the kitchen floor.

Let me go upstairs for a minute and this time you stay here. Keep the door shut.

I’ll be back in a minute - Okay?”

“Okay”, she answered meekly.

He left briefly and returned with a small roll of wire and a large plastic leave bag.

“Get your vacuum cleaner and the hose with it.”

She left the room to fetch the vacuum.

He cut a short piece of the telephone wire he had brought with him. He proceeded to fold the man’s outstretched arms over across his chest . He placed the hands together. On the back of each hand was a large tattoo, “FM”. He bound them with the wire.

With another piece of wire, he looped it through the bend of the knees and

drew them together, wrapped the other end of the wire behind the neck. He tucked the knees to the chest pulling the body into a fetal position and tied it tight.

Mrs. Murray returned with the vacuum. She stopped in the doorway and gasped.

"I had to tied him up so we can get him into the bag. If I waited much longer he'd stiffen up and I'd never be able get him bundled like this.

Give me the bag."

She handed him the bag.

"Now, open the end and when I lift him up you slide the bag over his head as far as you can. Okay, here we go,"

Jack lifted and she slid the bag over the head and half down the back.

"Now, I'll lift the other end and you pull the bag all the way down. Okay, one, two, three - pull."

Jack reached over and drew the opening of the bag closed.

"Give me the vacuum hose and plug the vacuum in."

He used both hands to hold the bag opening tightly around the hose.

"Okay, start up the vac."

The motor whirred and the bag slowly collapsed into the shape of its contents. When most all the air had been withdrawn, he removed the hose and tied the opening shut with a piece of the wire.

"Clean out the bottom of the bedroom closet and bring me the biggest towel that you have."

She left, returned with towel and went to clean the closet.

Jack stretched the towel on the floor and rolled the bag on to it. He then proceeded to drag the towel with the bag riding on it towards the bedroom.

He finally got to the closet door. He was breathing heavily. He stopped and sat on the bed for a rest as she finished unloading the items from the closet floor.

"He's not as light as he looks", he said wryly.

"Okay, let's see if he fits."

Jack rolled the bag into the closet. It just fit.

"Beautiful", he exclaimed with a sense of morbid pride as he shut the closet door.

"Now, what?", she asked.

"I can't just leave him there."

"I'm not sure what to do next. I've got to think about it but we've got plenty of time. He's going to be fine in that bag with the air sucked out of it. He should last at least a couple of weeks I would think and in the mean time, we'll figure out what to do with him.

Let's go in and clean up the kitchen."

"I can't stay here with him in the closet like that. I'll be scared to death. What if he wakes up?"

"Wakes up!

What are you kidding? Unless I see Jesus Christ coming through that door, he's not waking up. I'm sure."

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

"Okay, you come up and stay with me. You can have my bed. I'll do the sofa.

Then after we get rid of him you can come back.”

“Oh, thank you. Thank you.”

She paused.

“What about Suzy?”

He paused.

“Okay, the cat can come too. Just be sure to bring the litter box.”

And with that they left the apartment, locked the door as best they could and retired upstairs to Jack’s place

Chapter 4

He hadn’t slept well in days. He’d been back to the down stairs apartment a dozen times, sometimes in the middle of the night, checking the bag in the closet. It was as if he looked enough times, it would magically disappear. He hoped it would. That would mean the whole thing was just a bad dream.

It was always there!

No smell yet and it was about four days now. Sucking the air out of the bag seemed to be working pretty good. He’d also put moth flakes around the bag. That was the only odor seeping from under the closet door.

“So far, so good”, he thought but he knew this couldn’t continue. He couldn’t just leave it there forever. But what to do with it, that was 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 could dump it, as soon as the body was found, surely a police investigation would follow. Could they trace any thing back to him or the old lady? He’d seen a lot of TV crime shows and the investigations looked pretty sophisticated. So who knows?

“Probably a good chance”, he thought.

Jack arose from the sofa as the sun streamed in through the window. Last night was a little better than usual. He’d got about four hours sleep. That was two hours more than previous nights.

It was eight o’clock. The bedroom door was still closed. She wasn’t up yet.

That was another problem. He certainly wasn’t going to let her stay with him indefinitely and he knew that she wasn’t going back down stairs while the body was still in there.

He dressed himself and walked down to the front of the building, again checking the closet on the way. The weather was warm and the breeze light. He sat down on the bench and lit his usual, daily cigar.

“So this where you guys hang out.”

“Hey, Petey. Yeah this is it.

Sit down.

Do you smoke? I got an extra one right here”, and he patted to his shirt pocket.

“Na, thanks anyway but gave up smoking when cigarettes were thirty-five cents a pack. I know if I smoke a cigar I’ll be right back. I use to do a pack and

half a day. I don't want to take a chance, if you know what I mean"

"Sure. I understand.

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."

"Did you like it?"

"Yeah, it was fun. Nice and relaxing. Quiet. I'd even say serene".

"Wanta go tomorrow?"

"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. I'm going to a friend of mine's place up state.

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 also has a big pond, I guess you could almost call it 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 and reel and all the fishing stuff."

"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?"

"Can't. He's got some stuff he's gotta do."

"Well, sounds like a good time. I'll be like a kid again.

Sure. Sign me up. I'll go."

"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.

And, bring a couple of extra cigars. Larry's a cigar guy."

The horn blew at eight-thirty. It was an old, beat up jalopy, with a hubcap missing and a dent in the front fender. About a ninety-two.

Jack opened the door.

"Throw those papers in the back".

Jack picked newspaper from the seat and threw it in the back on top of the others lying there and sat down.

"I got the beer in the trunk. Away we go!"

"Where'd you get this?", asked Jack.

"My daughter's kid. She went to college with it and when she graduated, like all the kids today, first thing, get a new car. So I got this.

Look's like shit but runs good. Good for around here too. Who's gonna steal it?"

It took about an hour like Petey had said.

With the radio not working, idle banter flowed back and forth as they rode.

"Larry's Fishin' Hole - No license Required", it read.

Petey turned down the long dusty, rutted road at the sign. They bounced their way toward the distant house at the end of the lane.

Another sign by the house read "You are Here at Larry's - Fish are There", and a big red arrow pointed towards the lake.

Petey pulled up in front of the house and they got out.

The house door opened and burly, unshaven Larry stepped out.

"What do we got here? Two fishin' city slickers?", he jested as he reached and grasped Petey's hand.

"How ya been Petey?"

Ya look okay.

Aint seen ya since last year."

"Doin' good Larry. Doin' good.

This is Jack a buddy of mine from around the corner by me."

Jack reached out and shook Larry's hand.

"Got the beer?"

"Sure! In the trunk with a bag of ice on it like usual".

Petey got the beer and they all went inside.

It was a dingy little room, with dingy furniture and a dingy kitchen off to the side.

"Rusty! Get off the sofa".

The red mongrel, startled by the command, jumped from the sofa.

"Grasp one of the beers and sit down. Let's talk a bit and then we'll get to some fishin'", he said in a gravelly voice as he popped open the beer can.

"How's things down by you? Just as shitty as here I suppose."

"Yeah, probably worst. Here, at least, you don't have street gangs."

"Street gangs! We don't even have streets!", Larry replied with a laugh, as he reached for another beer.

"So, what's with these gangs anyway?"

Petey, silently glanced at Jack.

"Go ahead Petey, tell 'em what happened to you the other day. Down at the bank."

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

"That's some shit!" responded Larry.

"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.", and he pointed to a twelve gauge standing in the far corner.

"I know you're pretty good with it. I saw you in Nam shootin' a lot of them gooks, like tin cans off a fence post. You know how to handle yourself."

He stood up, walked to corner, brought the gun over and handed it to Petey.

"What about you Jack? I got one you can use too, if you want it."

"It's not that simple Larry.

First of all, 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."

"Suppose your right, but I myself, couldn't be livin' that way. I'd have ta fight back some how. Livin' in fear all the time and kissin' these bastards asses ain't no way to live. Not for me anyway.

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, I was an awful lot younger too."

"Aint 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 and 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 he pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and lit up.

"Now, let's do some fishin'. Grab those poles over there."

They left the house and walked towards the lake. As they walked they passed several large ponds teeming with fish. With every step the fish rushed to bank beside them.

"Look at these guys. They look like piranha without the teeth. There's hundreds of them."

"Oh, they think their getting' fed. Every time you come near the pond they think it's dinner time."

"What do you feed them?"

"Use ta be liver but that got kinda expensive and messy, so now we use a commercial food. Dried stuff. It's a lot cleaner and cheaper.

But, they'll eat anything that you throw in there", and with that Larry threw his cigarette butt into the pond.

The water churned as dozens of fish rushed towards the tasty morsel and instantly devoured it.

"See what I mean!"

They continued to walk towards the lake.

"Here, we gotta go this way", and he pointed to the roadway branching to the left.

"It's shorter the other way but I got all my equipment blocking the other road. Tryin' to clean the brush away from the bank over there so there's more fishin' room.

That reminds me, I gotta tell Ned about that pile of wood chips. He's the guy a couple of houses up the road. Whenever I get a big pile, he comes down and picks 'em up."

"What's he do with them?"

"Don't really know, I think landscaping stuff. I know his son's in the business, I'm not really sure. Never asked. I don't really care as long as he gets 'em out of here."

"Why don't you feed them to the fish?"

They all laughed and continue to the lake.

The ride home sure seemed longer than the ride up, but all in all it was a great day. Jack actually caught seven fish and Petey six. They were in the trunk,

packed in the ice they brought with the beer.

“Wonder if I remember how to cook them.”

“Nothin’ to it”, replied 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, 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 and helpin’ out, he wasn’t just shittin’. He’d do it.

I was with him in Nam one time and he got into it with three guys. They beat the livin’ shit out of him.

Two days later, he was back with a bat and took on all three again and this time gave all three a good old ass kickin’. Larry never was into takin’ a lot 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.”

The sun was just going down when they got home. Petey dropped him off in front of the apartment. There was a small crowd milling around outside the building. A cop car and an ambulance were sitting across the street, both with lights flashing.

Jack’s heart sank.

“Jesus Christ, I bet they found the bag”, he thought to himself as he left the car.

“Jack, here’s Larry’s number. Remember you asked me for it before”.

Petey handed Jack a scrap of paper. He stuffed it into his pocket in mechanical fashion as he closed the door.

“Thanks, Petey”, he, replied in a hollow voice while staring at the crowd.

“Oh, Jack - get your fish out of the trunk”, and he popped the deck lid.

“Oh yeah, sure - thanks”.

He walked to the rear of the car in zombie like fashion still staring at the crowd and straining to see if the lights where on in the old lady’s apartment.

He took the fish and walked slowly towards the building.

“What’s going on?”, he asked one of the bystanders.

“I think it’s an old lady”, was the replied.

“What about the old lady?”

“Think she had a heart attack. They found her in the hallway.

Here, they’re bringing her out now.”

Two men carefully carried the gurney from the stairs to the front doorway. Jack walked over to the ambulance and awaited their arrival.

“Mrs. Murray. What happened?”

“I don’t know Jack I just passed out and 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”, and they pushed the gurney into the ambulance.

“Well, how is she?”

“We think she’s going to be okay but that’s for the doctors to decide”.

And with that they shut the ambulance door and drove away.

“Thank God”, he muttered as he sighed in relieve.

He didn't want to see the old with a heart attack but it was certainly better than the body being found, he thought.

He had to get rid of it. Another incident like this and he'd have a heart attack.

He walked up the stairs and into the old lady's apartment and opened the closet door.

It was still there just as it was the last time and the time before and the time before that. No smell either, just the moth flakes.

He went up to his apartment, got out the fry pan and started cooking the fish.

It was good, a welcome change from frozen dinners and microwave heat ups. He walked into his bedroom. Some of her things were on the dresser and he carefully pushed them aside. Tonight, at least he'd be in his own bed. Maybe that would give him a better night's sleep.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, keys and the crumpled piece of paper with Larry's number on it. He carried it over to the lamp to make sure that he could read it. It was faint but legible. He flattened out the scrap and slid it into his wallet, undressed himself and fell onto the bed. He laid there staring at the ceiling.

"What a sick thought", he mumbled to himself.

"Sick, but probably the best idea I've had yet", he mused.

"Got to do something. Can't keep going down to the closet every other minute and just hoping it would disappear".

He sat up in bed and thought about it some more. He reached for his wallet and took Larry's number from it.

Would Larry really go for it? He said he would do what ever he had to, to help out and this was going to be a big help out, that was for sure. Hopefully, not too big!

"Okay, what the hell. The worst that would happen is he wouldn't do it", he thought as he reached for the phone.

He began to dial the phone. As he was about to push the final button he shut off the phone. What was he going to say when Larry answered?

"Let's see. 'Larry, I got this body in the downstairs closet and I want your help to get rid of it'. Was that it?"

There must be a more subtle way to put it?

How about, 'Larry, you said you would help out if we needed you.'

Yeah, that's a little better. I'll start that way", he thought.

He redialed number.

"Hello"

"Hello - Larry - this is Jack"

"What's the matter. Ya forget something or ya just wanta come back tomorrow for some more fishin'?"

"No Larry that's not really it.

Remember this morning when we where 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. I hate to see anybody get abused by those shit bags,

especially when their friends of mine bein' abused".

"Well, I got this problem - "

The conversation went on for ten minutes.

"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 make sure I don't have any customers around and I can get everything ready."

"Thanks again Larry. See ya tomorrow", he hung up the phone and dialed Petey.

"Petey, this is Jack.

Can you do me a favor tomorrow, 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 me an empty box for one of those sets. A big one.

Bring it over here. I want to get rid of an old TV. It plays good but I just want to get rid of it. I want you to help me carry it out and I want to put it in a box so just in case we drop it, the glass doesn't fly all over.

Then I wanta 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 and to make sure and he still wants it.

What do you think?"

"Sure Jack, I'll be over tomorrow as soon as I get the box, morning".

Morning came and Jack arose early. He continually peeked out the front window for Petey's arrival. When he pulled up, Jack raced down the stairs to meet him at the curb.

"Is this the kind you wanted?" Petey pointed the box protruding from the trunk.

"Yeah, perfect".

Jack reached into his pocket and pulled 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. But don't ya need some help with the TV?"

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

Jack lifted the empty box out of the car's trunk, closed the deck lid and carried it to the second floor and into Mrs. Murray's bedroom.

He knew Petey would be gone for at least twenty minutes or so. He purposely sent him to the Dunkin Donuts Shop. He knew that it was about fifteen blocks away.

He laid the box on its side, opened the closet door, dragged the bag out and rolled it into the box. It fit perfectly. He then, tilted the box upright and stuffed wads of newspaper around the bag to keep it in place. He packed the top tightly and closed the lid. He bound the box with several loops of packing tape and then secured it with heavy cord. He dragged the box into the hallway and awaited

Petey's return.

Petey return in just about the time he expected, twenty minutes.

"Let's get it down these stairs and into the car. I'll take the bottom".

They lifted the box and Jack backed slowly towards the steps.

"God damn, this is some heavy TV", remarked Petey as they lifted the box.

"They don't make 'em like they used to. The old ones like this were heavy okay", replied Jack as they jockeyed it down the stair well and into the trunk of the car.

"I'll go up and get a couple of bungee cords to tie the trunk lid down."

Jack returned and secured the lid. They got into the car and headed off towards Larry's.

They rode along, engaged in the usual jabber with Jack's eyes constantly looking in the side view mirror, fearful that the box might slip from its resting place in the trunk.

After twenty miles or so, he began to relax, confident that it was secure. He stopped his continual glancing in the mirror.

"Hey, Jack what's that cop want?"

"Cop! What cop?"

"He's right behind us with the lights going", answered Petey.

"Better pull over", Jack replied nervously.

The car slowed and rolled to a stop at the road side. Petey rolled down the window reached for his wallet as the cop walked up to the car.

"How are you gentleman doing today?", the cop asked.

"What's the problem officer?"

"What's in that box in your trunk?"

"A television. We're takin' it up to a friend."

"Television, huh"

Jack's heart was racing top speed. He felt as if it was to jump from him chest at any moment. He swallowed hard and remained silent.

"Yeah, we're takin' to Larry at 'Larry's Fishin' Hole'".

"Oh, you mean Larry Fine.

I know Larry, known him for years. He's okay. I used to call him 'Fine Larry', cause he use let me take my kids up there all the time to fish for free. He was great.

I don't know how he ever made any money. Everybody I ever met there was fishing for free! But that was Larry for you.

I guess the fish he sells wholesale is what keeps him going.

Anyway, the reason I stopped you is you have to have a flag on that box. Like a red piece of cloth will do it."

With that the cop glanced in the back side of Petey's car littered with old newspapers and clothes.

"There's a flannel shirt in the back seat that looks kinda red. Take that and tie it on the bungee and you're set to go.

And by the way, tell Larry that Tim Harbor was asking about him.

Have a good day".

Jack reached into the back seat and grabbed the shirt, stumbled from the car

in nervous exhaustion and tied it on the bungee. He got back into the car and slumped into the seat as they pulled out and continued to Larry's.

They reached Larry's turn off. A hand lettered sign was hung over the Larry's Fishin' Hole sign.

It read, 'Sorry - No Fish are Bitin' Today - Closed for Repairs'. They rode down the dusty, bumpy road to Larry's house.

Larry was sitting out in front, with a cigar in hand like usual.

"You got it here alright I see."

"Hope it's gonna work okay after that ride down your road there", answered Petey.

"Oh, it's gonna work just find", replied Larry's with a slight grin.

All three walked to the back of the car. Petey reached to untie the bungees.

"No, leave 'em on "

"Well, how are we gonna get it out of trunk and into Larry's?", asked Petey.

"You didn't tell him?" asked Larry.

"No, I didn't but I guess I gotta now."

"Listen, Petey, there's no TV in there. Let's go over here and sit down for a minute.

Jack then proceeded to tell the whole story start to finish.

Petey sat silently, in an almost trance-like state as the tale unfolded.

"You gotta be shittin' me!", Petey exclaimed in an astounded tone as Jack finished.

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

"Probably, wouldn't have", replied Petey, "But guess what, it's too late now. So what happens next?"

"Well, we're gonna get rid of that 'TV' now once and for all", answered Larry.

"If you wanta come along and help that's okay, but if you'd rather just stay here and wait, that's okay too. Let me tell ya though, it aint gonna be pretty."

"In too deep now. May as well go for the whole ride. Let's go", replied Petey and with that, all three got into the car and drove down towards the fish ponds.

As they approached the ponds, Petey saw the wood chipper next to one with its shoot pointed out over the water.

"Holy shit! I think I'm gettin' the idea. Aint gonna be pretty is right!", exclaimed Petey.

They backed the car up to the mouth of the chipper and all got out. They wrestled the box from the trunk onto the ground. Jack pulled out a pocket knife and cut the box open. He rolled the plastic bag out. And slit it open.

There he was just as Jack had left him.

"Don't smell too bad considerin' its been a bunch of days now", said Larry.

"Jesus Christ! 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 was the boss man", exclaimed Petey.

"He won't be doin' any more collecting, that's for sure".

"Start the chipper let's get this over with".

"Wait a minute Jack", said Larry.

“You don’t think I’m gonna feed my fish all that cloth, do ya. We gotta get him undressed. Those cloth pieces will kill the fish.. Here gimme the knife. You pull off the shoes and belt and I’ll cut off the rest”.

Soon, the body lay naked next to the machine.

“Okay, I’ll start her up and we’ll get to it.

Oh, get that old plastic shower curtain out of the back seat so we can cover the shoot. I don’t wanta get all splattered”.

Jack got the curtain and put it over the shoot as Larry started the chipper.

“I think we gotta go head first so his arms don’t get stuck”, said Jack and Larry agreed.

They lifted the body and guided it into the shoot. The motor began to accelerate as it devoured the body. A red, pulpy stream gushed out over the pond. The water churned as the fish rushed towards the spot where it landed.

The water pooled bright red as the particles hit and then within seconds the color disappeared as the fish swarmed.

Petey watched for a second or two and then walked to the side and began to vomit.

Jack and Larry continued to feed the final portion of the corpse into the machine.

Then it was over. Larry turned off the chipper and all three stood silently for a moment with a distant gaze.

Jack broke the silence.

“Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Wasn’t so bad! It was fuckin’ awful!”, cried Petey.

“Yeah, you’re right, fuckin’ awful. But it’s done”, agreed Jack.

“Now we gotta hose down the machine and burn the clothes, bag and box. We don’t want a trace left, not so much as a fart”, replied Larry and with that it was finished.

They all went back to the house, Larry took some beer from the fridge, they went out to the front yard and sat down.

Larry looked up as they sat.

“What the hell is that? I thought I put up the closed sign?”, he said as he spied a cloud of dust coming up from the roadway.

Coming into view was a police car.

“What the hell!”, exclaimed Jack with his heart pounding in his throat.

The car pulled up and stopped. Larry squinted to see who was in the car. The door opened and Tim stepped out.

“How it going?”

“Not bad”, replied Larry in the calmest voice he could muster.

“I saw that closed sign out front and I wanted to bring my kid over tomorrow to do some fishing. Are you gonna be closed tomorrow too?”

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

“Great!

How’d you guys make it here with that TV. How did it work out? It was just kinda hanging out of the trunk and I was wondering if you made down this bumpy lane here without it falling out?”

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

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

“Aint hooked it up yet”, answered Larry.

“Want a beer Tim?”

“Not when I’m drivin’ the car here”, and he pointed to the police car.

“But thanks anyway. I’ll see you tomorrow then. So long boys. It was nice seeing you again. Have a safe one home.”

And with that he got back in the car and drove away.

They all exhaled in unison as Tim pulled out.

It was a long ride home. Not much was said only, Petey telling Jack that he wasn’t holding any grudges.

To be quite honest, he felt a perverse sense of satisfaction too.

“One less smart ass thug”, he thought to himself. and anyway, nobody really killed anyone. It was an accident.

Even if he had been killed, so what.

“A prick that probably deserved it”, he thought.

Chapter 5

Jack strolled out the front door of his building and headed for his usual daily smoke at the bench. He sat and lit the cigar with several long, slow draws.

It had been a week since the morbid task had been completed.

Mrs. Murray had returned from the hospital and was doing well. The doctors attributed her remarkable recovery to the medication she was taking. Jack, however, was pretty sure that the removal of the bag from the closet contributed even more to her improvement than did the medicine.

Jack had 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 even if she had asked. Her only response was overwhelming relief at its disappearance.

He’d spoken to both Petey and Hal several times since. Small talk, bench talk. Neither of them said anything to Hal about the trip to Larry’s.

“Hey, Hal how you been”, asked Jack as Hal approached the bench.

“Not bad. Not bad.”

“What’s you hearing around the neighbor?”

“Well, yesterday, a guy in the building next to mine was tellin’ me that he heard some street talk”.

“Street talk? What do you mean?”

“Stuff about that gang of young bastards, you know, they call themselves ‘FM’, the Firemen”.

“So, what did he hear?”, asked Jack eagerly.

“Well, this guy tells me that that one was their leader is nowhere to be found. He just kinda went off into thin air. Nobody knows.

Those punks seem to be thinkin’ that he took off with pretty much all the money. He was like the safety deposit box for the gang. He used ta carry it around with him all the time and when ever any of ‘em needed cash he just

peeled it off to them. He used ta give chits, like little pieces of paper tellin' 'em how much cash they 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 always got the power."

"You said he always kept the cash on him? In his pocket?", asked Jack with surprise.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not sure about any of this. I'm just tellin' you what this guy told me", answered Hal.

"How come the rest of them went for that arrangement? Why didn't they just demand their money up front?"

"I don't know. I guess because Sandman was a pretty merciless dude. I heard that he got crossed by one of them and he went and cut one of the guy's eyes out. He was just a mean bastard. He had no fuckin', conscience like an animal.

So I guess based on that the rest of them just did exactly what he told 'em including him keeping the money. They were all scared shitless of him. All except for one guy who was kinda his right hand man but I guess the Sandman screwed him too cause he's still around. He didn't disappear."

"What did you call him? Sandman?"

"Yeah, they called him Sandman cause he put a lot of guys to sleep, for keeps!"

"What's the guy's name that you said was his right hand man?"

"They call him DS. That stands for Deuce of Spades, like he's number two and he's good at puttin' people in the ground too".

"Who's the guy that's telling all this anyway? 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 one day and I happened to meet him. He had a Nam tattoo and I saw it and I started talkin' to him. He was over there too, in the Delta. He even had a couple of holes in his leg to as souvenirs.'

"Well, how does he know all this shit about the FM then?"

"He almost every day goes over to the Box, you know the Lunch Box, that little divey eatery on Hudson Street. He goes over about ten o'clock in the morning to get a little breakfast and who's always in there but a bunch of FMers. They always sit at the same table and bullshit for an hour and Frank hears a lot of shit.

They never pay. They always tell Charlie, he's the owner to put it on their tab. Of course, they never pay the tab. It really pisses Charlie off but what can he do about it?"

"Not much I guess. Not much", replied Jack disgustedly.

Jack took his final drag on the remaining cigar stub, discarded it and walked with Hal back towards his building.

"Where's Hudson Street? The Lunch Box?"

"It's about three blocks down and turn left. Ya can't miss it. Just look for the place with the windows that haven't been washed in a couple years.", replied Hal

as they approached his house.

Hal went upstairs and Jack proceeded to the Box. He looked in through the hazy window and there, just as Hal described, sat four of the gang at a table near the front.

Jack went in and sat at the counter about three stools up from the table. It was just as he described, they all bantered back and forth in loud, boisterous voices.

Jack ordered a coffee, slowly sipped and listened.

After twenty minutes or so,

“Put it on my tab Charlie. I’m buyin’ today”, announced DS with a laugh, as they all got up and left.

“Those bastards! Every god damn day. Same shit”, blurted Charlie, as the door slammed.

He smacked the spatula on the grill.

“God damn!”, he repeated.

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

“Those fuckin’ bums come in here everyday, order up breakfast and never pay a dime”.

“He just said, ‘Put it on his tab’, didn’t he?”, replied Jack, again in a naïve tone.

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

“Why not call the cops?”

“Cops! They’re more afraid of those punks than I am!

And, even if I did call, the next thing would be, my place would get burned out.

Did you see the FM tats on the back of their hands?

They call themselves the Firemen. Why do you think? It’s sure not because they put fires out!”

“It’s a bitch”, answered Jack in a sympathetic voice. With that, he left the Lunch Box and walked home.

When he got home, he immediately got on the phone.

“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?”

“Well, I come to find out there was a shit load 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 looked.”

“Man! What a hump!”, replied Larry.

“What can I say?”, he continued.

“Next time, we’ll make god damn sure we take a real good look”.

Next time!”, exclaimed Jack.

“You’re not gonna keep taken 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. I don’t like what they’re doing, but they’re not bothering me”, replied Jack

“Trust me. They will! They will!

And when it happens you’ll get sick of it real quick, and I might be getting’ a call about some free food for my boys.

I’ll be waiting’ by the phone.”

Chapter 6

“Pow! Pow! Pow!”

“What the hell is that?”, thought Jack as he awakened.

He looked at the clock. It was ten o’clock. The television was blaring. He’d fallen asleep in the living room chair.

“Pow! Pow!”

It was coming from his front door.

He arose and walked to the door and looked out through the peek hole to see three men. He recognized them immediately.

“Open the door!”

“Open the door or we’ll huff and we’ll puff and we’ll blow your house down”, said the second man with a laugh.

“What do you want?” asked Jack.

“What the fuck do you think we want. We want to get in. Open the door”, answered the first man.

Jack, again squinted through the peek hole. He could see a little more clearly now. It was DS and two of the guys he had seen in Charlie’s.

Reluctantly, Jack unlocked the door, opened it and faced the three.

“That’s a boy.

We’re here doin’ some charity work. We’re collectin’ for a community group called the Firemen’s Fund.

Have you heard about some of the apartment fires here in the neighborhood?”, DS asked rhetorically and then continued without an answer.

“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 they never woulda happened.

What do ya think?”, he again asked rhetorically and then once more continued with out an answer.

“What we do is make sure that, that kinda thing doesn’t happen to you.

Now, it’s hard to keep this kinda service going without support. We here to ask for your contribution. We suggest, strong suggest, a fifty dollar per month donation.”

He paused.

“Let’s quit the bullshit. Give up the fifty bucks and ya don’t get burned out”, chimed in the second man.

Jack said nothing. He reached into his pocket and pulled out forty dollars.

“It’s all I’ve got now”.

The three hesitated for a moment.

“Okay, but we’ll be back next month and it’ll be sixty bucks. That’ll give ya a whole month to save up”, and with that they left, slamming the door behind them.

Jack went back into the living room and sat down and sighed.

He could hear, from out in the hallway, their banging on the door of the apartment next to his, as they made their way through the building.

“What a bitch”, he thought.

He’d allowed himself to be pushed around by a bunch of low life thugs and he hadn’t done anything about it. He’d just sucked it all down like a kid on a playground being roughed up by the schoolyard bully. He felt ashamed of himself, but then again, what could he have done?

He thought of what his father had told him when he was a child.

“There’s a fine line between bravery and stupidity and you should always know the difference”.

To confront these pricks certainly would have been over that line.

What would have it proved? They just would have beaten him senseless and taken the money anyway, he consoled himself.

He sat in the chair with a vacant stare.

As he pondered, Larry’s words came into his thoughts.

“Trust me. They will. They will.

And when it happens you’ll get sick of it real quick and I might be getting’ a call about some more free food for my boys.

I’ll be waitin’ by the phone”.

The more he thought, the angrier he became.

Why should those young punks be allowed to terrorize the entire neighborhood?

Should he and everyone else just stand by and be subjected to their tyranny?

“Would I have put up with this kind of shit thirty-five years ago?”, he asked himself.

“Not a chance”, he thought.

“Then, why now? Because I’m old?

Sure, I’m old but I’m not crippled “, he mused.

“Maybe Larry was right, after all. They’d certainly deserve whatever happened to them,.

Bunch of little fucks!” he thought.

But the question then became how, when and where?

Chapter 7

“Hey Man, what the hell happened to you?”

“What do you mean?”, replied Hal.

“What do I mean? Your hand! What the hell happened to your hand?”, Jack replied.

“Oh, that”, Hal answered in a dismissive voice, as he raised his bandaged hand.

“Got my finger busted”.

“Well, yeah, but how?”

“Got it slammed in a door. Broke the little finger real good”.

“Slammed in a door? How did you do that”, Jack queried.

“Don’t make no difference how, it just got smashed”, he blurted out in a nervous voice.

There was a long pause as they sat in the warm morning sun.

Hal sat staring down at his injured hand in a trance-like gaze and methodically tapping his foot. Jack drew his usual, long slow drags on the cigar held in his teeth.

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

“No problem Jack. No problem!”, he replied unreassuringly.

Again, there was a long pause.

Then Jack spoke.

“How long have I known you Hal?”

“Don’t know. I guess pretty much ever since I moved here, probably a good three or four years maybe.”

“How much time do you figure we spend on this bench every week?”

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

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

“Probably right”, agreed Hal.

“I guess we know each other pretty well then. What do ya think?”

“I guess.”

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

“Suppose so”.

“What happened to the hand?” Jack queried again.

Hal began to speak slowly.

“It happened last night. The FM bunch came for the monthly ‘donation’ as they call it. Well, this time, when they came I’d already had a couple of beers in me and I just wasn’t in the mood for takin’ their shit.

So, when they pounded on the door, I looked out and when I saw who it was, I just told them ‘Fuck you, you scum bags. You’re not getting’ a god damn dime, now get outta here’.

Then they broke the door open and pushed me into the bathroom. They pushed me down into the bathtub and took the money out of my wallet.

Just as they were getting ready to leave DS showed up.

“What’s goin’ on with this guy”, he says to them and they tell about me not openin’ the door. That really pissed him off.

“We can’t be goin’ through this every time. If this gets out we’re gonna have trouble with all the other ones too.

Then, he says ‘Get his finger in between the door and jam, by the hinge’. They stuck my finger in the door crack and he slammed the door on it.

‘Next time it’ll be your dick’, he yells and they all left.”.

“Holy shit!”, responded Jack.

“What did you do then?”

“What could I do? I packed my hand in ice and walked to the hospital ER

down on Bradley and they set my finger and gave me some pain pills.”

A long silence again prevailed.

“Ponder and deliberate before you make a move”.

“What?”, queried Hal.

“Sun Tzu - The Art of War”, answered Jack.

“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 what we’re going to do”.

“What do you mean, ‘gonna do’?”

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

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

“That’s what I just said, ‘Ponder and deliberate before you act’. We have to decide how to stop this shit, and soon.

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, so according to Sun Tzu we’ve got that base covered.”

“I guess, then all we gotta do is the ‘ponderin’ and deliberatin’ part”, agreed Hal,

“And, by the way where did you get all this Chinese stuff from?”

“When I was in the service, I had this drill sergeant that loved ‘The Art of War’. He used to carry copied pages from it in his shirt pocket all the time. He used to quote it everyday. He even made us learn it. We’d get the quote of the day, everyday and the next day he’d call guys at random and ask them about quotes he’d given us and if you didn’t know it you we’re in for some heavy ball bustin’.

When I was going through it, I thought he was full of shit, but know what, lots of those words served me well, even when I got out and got a job.

Some jobs are like going to war everyday. Mine was anyway. Everyday somebody was trying to beat you down, get your job, get your bonus, and steal your accounts. It was just like war. Always under attack”.

He paused for a second or two.

“And this, this isn’t like war, it is war because people got to be killed to stop it”, he added.

“Tomorrow, bring Petey over with you. Between the three of us, we’ll come up with something.

By the way, you have any health problems, Hal?”

“I had dandruff when I was a kid”, he replied with a laugh.

“But now, thank God, I think I’m in pretty good shape, except for this finger”.

“What about Petey?”

“Don’t really know, but I never heard him bitchin’ about anything that I can remember”.

“Okay , see you tomorrow”, said Jack as they arose and walked away.

As he passed the second floor hallway on his way upstairs he noticed Mrs. Murray’s door ajar.

He stopped and lightly tapped on it.

"Mrs. Murray", he called through the crack in the door in a low voice.

"Mrs. Murray", as he slowly pushed the door partly open.

"Jack, is that you?", a voice came from the kitchen.

"Yes. I saw that your door was open and I wanted to be sure that you're alright".

"I'm okay. I called the super about the door, it must be a dozen times and 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".

She paused.

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

"Talk about what?"

"Last night. Those thugs came to my door and scared me out of fifty dollars. They said it was a 'donation' to their Firemen Club. 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 to do. Did I do the right thing, Jack?"

"Yes, you did."

"What should I do when they come back?"

"I think you have to give them the money until we can straighten all this out".

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

"See me before they are due to come and I'll help you out with the money", he assured her

"Help her out with the money", he thought to himself as he left her apartment and continued up to his own.

"Christ, I don't have the money to pay them myself".

"They won't be around for another month. By that time, this will be all figured out", he consoled himself with a flash of false confidence.

"Spies are a most important element in war, because on them depends an army's ability to move, Sun Tzu on The Use of Spies." The words rang clearly in his mind.

Chapter 8

"Charlie, give me a little more", as he pointed to his half filled coffee cup.

"Those bums that usually sit at that table, been here and left already?"

"Yeah", replied Charlie as he walked to the table with rag in hand.

"They always show up about ten and leave about eleven.

Not only do they not pay the bill, they always leave a mess. Spill shit all over the place. Don't even put the lid back on the sugar.

Look at this!

He dumps half the sugar holder in his coffee, and most of it just lays on the bottom", continued Charlie with disgust, pointing to the syrupy mass in the cup he was holding.

"They come here everyday?", asked Jack.

"Sure do. Like clockwork. Come here and steal breakfast from me and then

go home and get high, sleep it off and be ready for their 'Night Ride' as the call it".

Jack sat silently sipping the refilled coffee for a while. He was thinking, 'pondering' as Sun Tzu had instructed.

"See ya tomorrow, Charlie", announced Jack as he rose from the counter.

"Guess you're a regular now, Jack".

"I like the coffee and I pay the tab", relied Jack with a grin as he left.

He entered his building and headed up to his apartment to get a cigar. As he approached the second floor landing he mused about his yesterday's visit to the old lady.

"What a shitty way for her to live", he thought., "Always in fear".

It wasn't too good for him either, but then again he wasn't a frail old lady with a heart condition, he thought.

He walked by her door and stopped for a moment.

Maybe he should just talk to her for a minute. Try to cheer her up. Show some more concern and encouragement.

He turned, went back and knocked on the door. No answer!

He knocked again and door opened slightly from the impact. He could see the duct tape hanging from the door jamb.

He slowly swung the door open and called her name.

No answer!

He carefully walked into the apartment fearing what he might find.

He walked into each of the four rooms calling her name in a low voice.

"Nobody home", except Suzy who was cowering in the corner of the kitchen.

As he perused the kitchen he spied her medication bottles on the counter.

"Must be the heart pills", he thought.

"Digitalis", he read on the bottle.

"Sure, I remember Uncle Tom used to take these after his heart attack".

Jack's Uncle Tom had died when Jack was in his teens. Tom was a pretty old guy at the time and suffered from a mild case dementia and had had a heart attack.

Jack's Aunt Sally was always worried that Uncle Tom would forget and take extra doses while she was out. She used to hide the medication and often times come home to find the place a mess with Tom searching for the pills he hadn't remembered taking.

One day he actually did find them and took an extra dose. It almost killed him.

Jack paused in thought.

He popped the cap off the bottle. It was close to filled. He again stood in thought for few seconds and then dumped several of the pills into his hand.

He found a small, plastic sandwich bag in the cabinet and put the pills in it and placed the bag in his pocket.

Then he left the apartment, carefully trying to replace the duct tape as best he could.

“Ever killed anybody, Petey?”

“You I know did. Larry told you about me and Nam”.

“What did you think when you did it?”

“Didn’t think, just did it. It was what I was there for. Kill them or they kill you.

I never killed anybody up close and personal, it was always a guy in the distance, ya know what I mean?

It wasn’t hard to kill at the time, the adrenaline was pumpin’ full blast.. We were getting’ shot at and all we were thinking about was not getting’ killed ourselves. Didn’t really have time to worry about the guys we were killin’”.

“How did it make you feel? Afterwards”.

“Not too good. Later I felt bad for those guys. They were forced into that whole thing just like me but like I say before, it was them or me and I had to do what I had to do”.

“So, 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 Sparky. He was almost human to me.

That was about the closest I ever come to killin’ a person.”

“How come you killed him?”

“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 and he was my dog so I had the job of shooting’ him.

Felt pretty terrible about it, but it was kinda like Petey in Nam. It was my job and I had ta do it”.

“Do you think you could kill a person?”

“Maybe, if I had to, but I’m not really sure. I don’t think anybody that’s never done it, could really say. They might say ‘Oh yeah sure’, but when the time comes it might be a whole different story”.

“You’re right Hal. You’re right”.

There was a silence.

“What about you, Jack?”

“Don’t know if I could but I think I’d like to be able to”.

Again, a long pause.

“What are you getting ’at Jack, with all this talking about killin’?”

Another pause.

Jack looked up from his downward gaze and spoke.

“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 would if I had the chance.

I’m not talking about killing people here, I’m talking about exterminating rats and cockroaches. I look it as being just like Terminix or RotoRooter and cleaning out the bugs and sewer rats.

I guess I'm kinda letting my imagination run away with me", he ended with long exhaled breath.

"And I guess you're trying to see if Hal and me would go along with you if really decided to do something.

Right?", exclaimed Petey.

"Yeah, I guess so. You're right Petey.", replied Jack.

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

A silence.

"To be honest, I don't know if I could either Hal, in spite of all my bull shit.

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", sighed Jack.

Another silence.

"Even if we did wanta do it, how could we anyway?", asked Hal with furrowed brow.

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

"I'm not sure but I have some ideas",. replied Jack with a pause.

Did you ever kill a snake?"

"I never did but I saw a lot of 'em get killed when I was a kid down South, Cotton Mouths ya know".

"How'd they do it, Hal? Remember?"

"Yeah, they used 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. We got to cut the head off and then the body of the snake will die.

Now how we cut it off is the problem".

"What do you mean, 'Cut off the head'?"

"I mean if we get rid of the boss man, the gang will die out. The rest of them will wind up killing off each other trying to become the boss, especially if it looks like the old boss was killed by one of them in the first place."

"So what you're saying Jack, is we should get rid of that DS guy and try to make it look like one of the others did it?"

"You got it Petey.

If that don't work and the snake grows a new head then we get rid of the next guy who takes his place and keep on doing it til they run outta guys" answered Jack grimly.

"But how?" asked Hal.

"I'm not sure but I've got some ideas", replied Jack.

"Well, let's hear 'em", replied Hal.

The conversation continued with Jack leading the conversation and Petey and Hal interjecting about what they might do and how they might do it. All three spoke imaginatively and energetically, never suspecting they might really carry out any of the fantasized plots they were concocting.

After an hour or so of back and forth, Jack arose from the bench.

"I'm getting kinda tired of talking. If we're not going to decide to actually do something, I'm going upstairs and watch TV", he announced in a disgusted voice.

“Wait a minute, Jack, we didn’t say we weren’t doing anything, we said we weren’t going to be killing anybody”

After a moment, Petey, then continued.

“Let’s do what Hal said before, about sending a message. Maybe we can disrupt them, get them suspicious of each other and maybe that will break them up if we can get them at each other’s throats.

I’m not so sure it will work but let’s give it a try. At least we’ll feel like we’re do something”, concluded Petey.

“I don’t think it’ll mean a damn thing but I’m willing to try it if that’s all you guys want to do”, answered Jack in a discouraging tone.

He continued.

“Like you said at least we’ll be doing something and maybe I’ll be wrong and it’ll work.

I’ll do it tomorrow”.

Jack turned, left them and walked back to his apartment. He withdrew a sheet of paper from the cabinet drawer, walked to the kitchen table and sat motionless with pen in hand before it. Deep in thought, he began to write.

The next morning Jack arose, dressed and walked to the Lunch Box for his usual coffee.

He sipped the cup and carefully watched Charlie’s every move.

Charlie spent most of his time at the far end of the store in front of the grill. When a customer asked for a soda he went into the back room to get it.

“Hey, Charlie, how come the soda cooler is in the back. You always have to keep going back there to get them all the time?”

“Use to have it in the front, over there”, he pointed to a vacant outline on the floor next to the front door.

“But then kids used to run in the front door, grab a soda out of the case and run out so I had to move to the back here”, he explained.

“I get it”, Jack replied.

He looked up at the clock.

The door opened and in walked the four of them, DS leading the bunch.

“Ten o’clock, on the dot. Right on time as usual”, Jack thought to himself.

Jack stayed a few more moments then left the Lunch Box.

The next day he awoke early, eight thirty. He went into the bathroom and carefully affixed the artificial mustache he had bought the day before, combed his hair in a slicked back fashion and donned a pair of low power reading glasses.

He stepped back from the mirror, admiring his new appearance.

He left the apartment and walked briskly to the playground on First Avenue. Several young children were playing basketball.

Jack sat on the bench adjacent to the court and watched. The game continued back and forth. Jack sat quietly, continually glancing down at his watch.

“Nine fifteen and counting”, he thought.

As the nine thirty hour approached, Jack stood and walked toward the court. He held a crisp ten dollar bill in his hand as he approached one of the boys standing on the sidelines.

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

“Listen old man, I’m not into gay stuff!

Leave me alone!” the boy quickly responded.

“No! No! “, replied Jack.

“All you have to do is take this piece of paper down to the Lunch Box at the end of the block”.

The conversation paused.

“You sure that’s all I gotta do?”, boy answered.

“Positive!”

“Well, okay”, the boy answered. He warily reached for the note.

“Here’s what you do. You take that note down to the Lunch Box, keep it in your pocket. Go in and ask the guy behind the counter for a soda”.

Jack reached into his pocket and took out two dollars.

“Here’s the money for the soda. When he goes in the back to get your soda, put this note on second table from the door, with face up. Put the sugar container on its corner so it stays there and doesn’t slide off the table.

Be sure he doesn’t see you do it.

When he gives you the soda, leave and come back here to me for your money”.

“That’s it?”

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

With that the boy left, heading towards the Lunch Box.

Jack again glanced at his watch. Nine forty five.

“Perfect”, he thought.

Jack waited patiently for the boy’s return. Five minutes passed and he spied the boy coming into view, soda bottle in hand.

He approached Jack with out stretched hand.

“Did it!”

“Was anybody in the place?”, asked Jack.

“Just me and the guy back of the counter”.

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

“Sure did!”

“Great!”, answered Jack as he handed the boy the ten dollar bill.

“If you want me hand out any more notes, I’ll be right here”, said the boy.

Jack left the playground and went back to his apartment, and immediately removed his disguise.

With his usual persona in place, he walked to the Lunch Box. He glanced at his watch as he walked. It was about eleven thirty.

Charlie was slumped on a stool in front of the counter, facing the tables with his apron clutched in his hand and head drooping. His hair was rustled and his grease spotted, white shirt torn.

He looked up as Jack entered.

“Charlie, what the hell is going on?”, Jack asked, even though he thought he sort of knew.

“Those same fuckin’ punks”, Charlie replied as he stood and threw his apron onto the counter.

“What this time?”

“I’m not really sure. The whole thing was strange”.

Charlie paused.

“Strange how?”

“Well, about ten o’clock that same bunch came in, like usual. All of a sudden, one of them, I think it was DS, yells ‘What’s this shit!’, and he stands up wavin’ this piece of paper at me.

I didn’t know what he was talking about. Then he comes over to me and shoves this note in my face.

The note says ‘No more ripping off the people in this neighborhood.

This is your only warning. Do it again and all of you will pay big.

This is no bullshit!

Signed : The People’s Army’

Then he grabs me by the shirt, pushes me against the wall and yells, ‘Where did this come from?’

I told him, ‘I don’t know’, but that wasn’t good enough I guess, because then he slapped me across the face and asked me again.

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 know.”

Charlie took a deep breath.

“What did they do then?”, asked Jack.

“They sat there and ate like usual, all the time talkin’ back and forth about that note, trying to guess where it came from.

Just before they left, the leader, DS took the note and lit it on fire and threw it on the table.

‘That’s what we think of that shit, one of them yelled as they left and when we find out you left it we’ll show ‘em what punishment really is!’

About fifteen minutes after they left, a kid comes in and tells me that they’re lookin’ all over the neighborhood, askin’ if anybody knows anything about that note.

Then the kid asks me if I remember him coming into the store earlier that morning and I told him ‘No, I didn’t’ and all the kid says is ‘Good’ and then he leaves.”

Jack finished his coffee and left the Lunch Box knowing full well that the next move was his. He suspected all along that would be the case and now he was sure.

Chapter 10

It was early morning, about six or so, as Jack was awakened by a loud pounding on the apartment door. He rolled over and glanced at the clock, six twenty-three to be exact.

The pounding continued and Jack arose and slowly moved towards the door.

“Who is it?” he shouted.

"It's Hal, Jack!"

Jack unlocked and opened the door.

"What the hell are you doing over here at this hour?" he asked.

"I came to tell you what happened last night over at my place" recited Hal in an excited tone.

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

"What note?" Jack asked playing dumb.

"Well, it seems that they got a threatening note at the coffee shop the other yesterday and the note was delivered by the kid and now they want to know who sent it to them."

"So what happened then?" asked Jack.

"The kid couldn't finger anybody. The head guy then says that the 'fire protection' payment is going up by ten dollars each month for everybody until he finds out who wrote the note.

They're going from building to building each night and I'm guessing they'll be here tonight."

"I really appreciate the information but why did you come over here at this hour to tell me?"

Hal paused for a moment.

"I just had a gut feeling that you should know" he replied.

"Just a feeling if you know what I mean" he repeated.

That evening proved Hal to be right. Jack heard the knock on the apartment down the hall, the muffled conversations, the door slam and then the subsequent knock on the next door. The sounds got louder and louder as they progressed towards his apartment.

Within several minutes, his door vibrated with a sound rap.

Jack opened the door to reveal three of the Firemen with the kid in tow.

"How about this dude?" they asked the boy.

The boy looked squarely at Jack, paused and shook his head and then stared downward.

Evidently, Jack's disguise had been effective.

"I'm getting' a little tired of this shit sonny boy" the leader said to the kid in a disgusted voice.

"You best be getting' your memory straight or I'll be beginnin' to think you made all this shit up" he continued.

"We'll be back next month and save up an extra ten bucks. Insurance premiums are goin' up" he said with a scowl as he pushed Jack back into the room and slammed the door.

Jack sank back into his chair and shut his eyes.

"How much more of this could he take? How could he continue to idly watch everyone in the neighborhood being continually harassed, exhorted and intimidated by this group of thugs.

Not much longer" he thought to himself.

Jack arose and walked into the bedroom. His gaze passed over the dresser

top and he noticed the plastic bag he had placed there several weeks ago. He picked it up and held it up to the light so as to more carefully examine its contents. It contained ten small white pills, those he had taken from Mrs. Murray's apartment.

"Dioxin" he muttered to himself, ".500 milligrams."

He paused in a brief thoughtful trance and then replaced the package on the dresser.

The next morning the library opened at nine A.M. Jack was waiting at the door. He immediately went to the computer bank and began his search.

He entered "dioxin toxicity" and carefully read the results.

"Oral doses effective after two hours. Lethal dosage 5 to 25 milligrams dependent on body mass."

"Ten times .500 milligram gives 5.000 milligrams. It's going to be close but worth a try" he thought to himself as he left the library.

On the way home he stopped at the Lunch Box. He sat at the counter, ordered a coffee from Charlie and waited.

Ten o'clock, on the dot and in they came all four of them, they sat at the same booth, in the same seats and spewed out the same profanity laden banter to each other.

He watched carefully in the mirror before him as DS eagerly withdrew five sugar packets from the container on the table.

"Let's get that coffee over here right quick. Don't be keepin' me waitin' and get me all pissed off at ya!" he yelled to Charlie as he slapped the packets on the back of his hand.

Jack continued to sit at the counter with his back towards them and watch Charlie scurry back and forth to fill their order.

After a few minutes, Jack reached into his pocket, withdrew two dollars, placed them on the counter. He then slipped several sugar packets into his pocket and left.

Back at his apartment, he took the ten pills from his dresser and carefully crushed them with a spoon into a fine powder. Then, he surgically opened one of the sugar packets with razor blade, discarded the contents and carefully poured the powdered pills back into the packet. He dipped the end of a toothpick into a drop of glue, applied it to the packet opening and skillfully resealed the package.

That night, sleep was brief for Jack. He arose several times, went into the kitchen each time and drank a beer, thinking maybe that would help. It didn't!

Finally, the sun cracked through the window and Jack arose from his last nervous attempt at sleep. His mind raced with the reality of what he was about to do.

"Forget the right and wrong of it, just do it and get it done" he told himself.

"What's one more dead sewer rat anyway?"

As nine thirty approached, he stuffed the sugar packet into his pocket and headed towards the Lunch Box.

As usual, Charlie served him his cup of coffee and a bit of idle chatter at the counter and then disappeared into the kitchen to continue the day's cooking. Jack immediately moved to the table behind him, removed all the sugar

packages from the container and replaced but two, one being that which he had brought with him.

Then, he waited!

Nine fifty-five, the door opened and they all marched in with the usual boisterous profanity.

“Get your ass out here with the cups, Charlie boy” one yelled back at the kitchen as they slid into the booth.

Charlie emerged from the back room carrying four mugs and a pot of coffee which he placed on the table in front of them.

Jack watched them keenly in the mirror behind the counter. DS reached for the sugar, picked up the two packets, tore them open, pour the contents into one of the cups filled it with coffee.

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

With that one of them reached to the booth behind him and retrieved several sugars from the adjacent table and handed them to DS.

He poured the additional sugar into the cup and took a large swallow. Jack took in every move. After several more gulps he saw DS reach for refill.

“It’s done!” he thought to himself.

He sat patiently awaiting. An hour passed and Jack still waited.

He noticed DS becoming quieter than usual and soon silent while the others chattered on.

“Hey boy, what’s with ya” one finally said to him.

“Ya aint said shit and ya aint lookin’ that good either” he announced.

DS slurred out his response.

“I aint feelin’ so great somehow. I’ll be best goin’ home and getting’ a little nappy in.”

“You be needin’ some help?” asked one of the others.

“Since when does I need help with anything?” he snapped back in a labored voice.

With that he slid out of the booth and walked to the door with slow measured steps.

Jack immediately placed two dollars on the counter and left Lunch Box following the stumbling DS from a safe distance.

He made it about two blocks from his building and suddenly his knees buckled. He fell against a wall adjacent to the sidewalk and unsteadily supported himself trying to regain his balance. After a minute or so he proceeded onward with the same wobbling gait.

When he finally reached the apartment door he leaned against it and fell into the entrance.

Jack walked hurriedly towards him and arrived at the door to find him lying on the stairs barely conscious.

“Come on man! Let me help you up to your place” said Jack as he attempted to lift him into a semi upright position.

DS struggled to his feet and with Jack’s assistance slow moved up the stairs, one labored step at a time to his apartment door. Once there he fumbled for his

key and vainly attempted to insert it into the lock.

Jack reached down and guided his hand and the door opened. He maneuvered him to the bedroom and dumped him onto the bed. He lay there on his back, taking deep, slow breaths, eyes closed bearing a pasty, grayish skin tone.

Jack sat down on the chair beside the bed and breathed heavily himself.

After several minutes, he summoned his strength, arose, walked into the kitchen and fished around for a garbage bag in each of the cabinets.

He went back to the bedroom. Nothing had changed. If anything DS's breathing seems a little better than before.

Jack sat down on the chair again, this time clutching the bag in his hands.

Minutes passed and once more Jack thought he noticed improvement in the man's breathing. Then, his eyelids began to flutter. One eye started to open.

A multitude of butterflies soared in Jack's stomach as he arose, placed his hand behind DS's head, lifted it and slipped the plastic bag over him. He twisted it tightly around his neck and held it sealed.

Within seconds, the man's legs began to quiver and after several more seconds, all motion ceased. His legs no longer moved and his chest failed to rise.

"It was done!" he thought. A strange calm came over him as he looked down at the motionless figure on the bed.

He rolled the body to its side and reached into the right pocket to withdraw the large, bulging object that it contained. He grasped it and pulled it from pocket. It was stack of hundred dollar bills folded in half and secured by a rubber band.

He rolled the body to the other side and withdrew another folded wad of bills from the left pocket. He shoved both rolls into his pockets.

"Now what?" he thought.

Should he just leave the him here?

He knew that after DS failed to show up for a day or two, some of the gang would surely come looking. When they found him what next?

What would they suspect?

Heart attack?

He sure looked blue!

Drugs? Maybe?

He paused his thoughts for a moment and then continued.

"They all knew he carried plenty of cash. When they find him with empty pockets that would surely reveal the real cause of his death - murder".

Jack wasn't about to put the money back, of that he was sure.

"So the only other choice then is to make the body disappear" he concluded.

He hesitated to reappraise his plan and then pulled the body from the bed onto the floor and dragged it to the closet door. He kicked the pile of dirty clothes from the closet floor out into the room and pushed the body into it. He proceeded to cover it with the clothes and then closed the door tightly.

Jack left the apartment locking it as he did and walked straight back to his own house. He called Petey.

"Petey - This is Jack. I'd like to do a little fishing tomorrow. What do you

think? Up at Larry's?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone.

Petey could tell from Jack's voice that there would be no fishing, probably fish feeding. He had heard Jack say many times that he was tired of "takin' shit" from the FM and it had to be ended. He knew intuitively from Jack's sober tone that he had just taken some of the necessary steps of which he had spoken.

Then Petey stuttered out a subtle question hoping his suspicions were unfounded.

"Are going to bring the bait again this time?" he asked hesitatingly.

"I am" replied Jack.

"I've got to use it before it goes bad on me" he added.

"Well, I guess we got to go then. I'll call Larry and I'll pick you up at about nine o'clock."

"No Petey, let's make it about five so we can get the bait into the trunk without a problem."

Again a short silence.

"Sure Jack, five it is."

Jack put the phone down, reached into his pockets and pulled out the two large rolls of bill and put them on the table.

He began to count. Forty-five hundred in the first pile and forty-three hundred in the second. Eighty-eight hundred and twenty dollars to be exact.

He sat for a moment, then re-secured the money with an elastic. He opened the refrigerator and took out a package of frozen peas, emptied the contents and placed money in package and put it back in the freezer.

Chapter 11

The next morning Petey arrived as scheduled.

Jack walked out of his apartment's front door dragging a rolled up piece of old carpeting behind him.

"Pop the trunk and help me" he yelled to Petey.

Petey obliged and together they wrestled the carpeting into the trunk of the car.

"I called Larry and he said he's ready" announced Petey as he entered the car.

"What's the rug for?"

"I grabbed it out of the garbage yesterday. It's exactly what we need. You'll see" replied Jack.

He and Jack drove straight to the apartment building and pulled around to the back. They removed the rug from the trunk and silently carried it up the two floors to DS's apartment. Jack took out the key, opened the door and they pulled the rug into the bedroom.

They unrolled the rug exposing three large, plastic garbage bags and a coil of rope. Jack opened the closet door and brushed the pile of dirty clothes aside, revealing DS's lifeless body, the plastic bag still over his head.

"Petey! Give me a hand"

Together they maneuvered the corpse into the bags and slid it to the center of the carpeting. They then tightly rolled the rug around the body and tied it with the rope in several segments.

"This aint gonna be easy getting' him down these stairs" remarked Petey in a low voice as they carried their package towards the door.

"Look. If we have to slid him that's OK. He's not going to yell. Just be quiet. No noise!

And don't drop him!" answered Jack in a whisper.

Several minutes later they arrived at the car.

"Jesus Christ! I thought I was going to have a heart attack" exclaimed Petey in a breathlessly.

They pushed and shoved the package into the trunk making it just fit and closed the deck lid.

The ride to Larry's was long and tense.

"I never thought you would do it. I know you talked about it a lot and I know you were plenty pissed but I never thought you would do it" Petey repeated.

"Neither did I" relied Jack soberly.

"But, I did and now that it's done, I'm glad!"

"What kinda pushed you over the edge Jack?"

"Well, I thought about it for a long time. I was really tired of taking all the shit from those punks and something had to be done.

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 alright!" answered Petey.

Jack paused and then added, "You know, I heard the story about the lady over on Beech Street the other day too."

"About the dog? I never got the whole story. What happened?" asked Petey.

"Yeah!

Evidently these guy came to her apartment. It was when they were lookin' to find me about that note I sent them.

Anyway, when they came into her place her dog nipped one of them, a little dog, the size of a mouse, you know what I mean?

So the prick took the dog and threw it out of the third floor window.

And then when the old lady started screaming and crying they took her over to the window and hung her half way out and threatened to throw her out too if she didn't stop yelling.

When I heard that, that was the final straw I guess. I knew I had to do what I had to do, and I did it!"

"What was it like Jack? I mean killin' him"

"You should know. Larry said you killed a shit load in Nam."

"But I mean, up close and personal like you did. I never really saw the guys I killed get hit up close."

"You know what!"

Jack paused and took a deep breath.

"It wasn't that bad after all.

I guess it was because I hated the son of bitch so much that it was like killing

a mosquito. After it's squashed, you've done a service not a sin because you know that you and nobody else are ever going to be bitten by that bastard again.

It's like you've done a public service."

Soon they were bouncing down the dirty road to Larry's.

Larry arose from his chair on the front porch and walked out to greet them with a beer in one hand and a half lit cigar in the other.

"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" replied Petey as he pointed to the back of the car.

"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?" answered Larry with a grin and another puff on his cigar.

"How about you Jack? Things okay by you?"

"Yeah! Great Larry" he replied somberly.

"But I'll be even better when this is done."

"I know what you mean. I know what you mean" said as he tapped on the trunk lid.

"Let's get to it. Drive on down to the pond as close as you can. I'll meet you down there. I gotta get some gas for the chipper" and he walked towards the shed adjacent to the house.

Jack and Petey drove slowly to the pond.

Within minutes, Larry arrived with the gas and refueled the chipper.

"Let's get him out of there and ready for processing" said Larry as Petey popped the trunk open.

They pulled out the carpeted body, unrolled it, removed the plastic bags and proceeded to undress the corpse.

"You gotta leave the bag over his head!"

"Getting' a little squeamish on us Petey?" asked Larry.

"Okay! Sure!" replied Jack while they hoisted the body onto the bed of the chipper.

Suddenly, Jack noticed the glint of a small gold pinky ring on the left hand.

He'd seen it before when he searched DS's pockets back at the apartment but in the excitement of finding the cash, he had forgotten about it.

"Wait a minute!" he yelled as they began to push the corpse towards the whirling blades of the machine.

They stopped.

"Let me get that ring off his finger."

Larry immediately reached into his pocket and withdrew a pen knife.

"What are you doing?" asked Jack staring at the knife.

"You don't think you're gonna just pull that thing off with his finger swelled up like that do ya?" replied Larry.

"Let me show ya how it's done. I got some practice with this kinda stuff."

With that he opened the blade, proceeded to amputate the finger at the knuckle and slid the ring off. Then he tore a piece from the clothing they had

striped from the body, wrapped the bleeding finger in it and handed the ring and the finger to Jack.

“What the hell am I going to do with this?” he asked as he thrust the blood stained package towards Larry.

Larry looked at Jack with a sly grin on his lips and answered.

“Let me tell you a story” he began.

“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 all the jungle shit, snakes, bugs and of course, the Cong.

All of a sudden, one of our guys goes down. He got it right through the top of his head. He was dead before he hit the ground.

All of us hit the ground too. Then pop! Another guy got it. The guy behind me stood up to get a look at where the shootin’ was comin’ from and pop he got one too and he fell right on top of me.

I just stayed there and heard a bunch more shots and a lot of screams. Then after a while, all was quiet and I see this Cong slidin’ down a tree about ten yards away. I knew it was him. I took a bead on him and bang got him like shooting’ a squirrel out of a tree.

It was quiet some more and I rolled out from underneath the guy that fell on me. I guess he kinda saved me cause he took a bunch of bullets in the back while he was layin’ on me.

Anyway I looked around and found all the other guys. Only one was alive and I called us in so they’d send a chopper for us or what was left of us.

Then I went over to the Cong. I couldn’t just leave him there without some revenge after what he did, so I cut his trigger finger off and shoved it in my pocket.

I started to walk away and then I stopped and went back cut off one of his ears and stuffed that in my pocket too.”

With that Larry took out his wallet and removed an object from its recesses. It had a thin, black, wrinkly outline encased in plastic.

“When I got back to base, I cut the bone out, flattened it out and dried it in the sun.

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” and he held it more up more closely for Jack and Petey to see.

“Why in Christ’s name did you do that?” exclaimed Petey.

There was a brief silence.

“Revenge, Petey. Revenge, I guess.

Every time I look at it, I kinda feel like I’m getting’ a little even with that prick for killin’ all my guys.

It might be kinda nutty but it makes me feel better.”

Again there was silence.

“What happened to the ear?” asked Jack ghoulishly.

“I gave it to the other guy that survived with me, Knotsy. We usta call him Knotsy cause he always said he had a knot in his stomach from the day he landed in Nam.

Knotsy and me, we were pretty good buds the whole time in Nam, especially after that thing with the Cong that day. Shit, we were the only two guys left of our original bunch.

After we got out of that shit hole and back to the States we kinda lost touch. Maybe a Christmas card but that was about it if you know what I mean.

Then one day about ten years after we was out he calls me and we get together again for a couple of drinks and bullshit. He said he was doin' pretty good, makin' a lot of bucks and all. He never really said exactly what he was doin' but it was workin' out alright.

Then just before we split, he pulls out his wallet and shows me, the ear all laminated in plastic like mine.

He said he figures that 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 about wantin' to buy this farm and how I didn't know if I could swing. I never saw or heard from him again but about a month later I get a check in the mail for ten grand with a note that says 'Good luck fishing. Some money for bait - Knotsy'. That's about thirty or forty thou today. The envelope had no return address and I never heard from him again.

I cashed the check and that's how "Larry's Fishin' Hole" got started."

"Man, that's some story Larry!

And you never saw the guy again?" exclaimed Petey.

"Nope! Never! Never even got to thank him." Larry replied in a some what solemn voice.

Again a brief silence fell.

"So why are you giving me this?" asked Jack holding out the wrapped, blood oozing finger.

"If I was you I'd get that back to that Fireman bunch. I'm pretty sure that would back 'em off big time."

Jack stared down at the bright red rag he was holding and replied.

Jack hesitated for a moment and then spoke.

"You know Larry, I think you're right on" and he tore off another piece of cloth from the clothing pile, rewrapped the finger and pushed it into his pocket.

Then they continued their task. A red gush flew from the shoot out into the pond. The fish swarmed towards its landing spot and within minutes the water cleared and nothing remained.

Larry pulled over a hose, washed down the machine and threw the clothes pile into an old, rusty drum for burning.

It was done.

All three went back to Larry's house for a beer.

Chapter 11

The next morning Jack arose and went to the kitchen. He rifled through one of the cabinet drawers and pulled out several old Christmas gift tags from the clutter. He selected the one with an image of smiling Santa holding his finger "aside his nose".

“Merry Christmas - Now back off. The People’s Army” he wrote on the tag.

He went into the bedroom, took the severed finger from its wrapping and tied the tag to the ring, then carefully rewrapped the finger.

He arrived at the Lunch Box and ordered his usual coffee and waited for Charlie to go into the kitchen. He took finger from his pocket and carefully placed it in the sugar container on the table in the booth. Just the tip protruded out from underneath the sugar packets.

He quickly moved back to his stool at the counter and stared at the clock over the kitchen window.

Nine fifty-five!

Then he waited for their boisterous entry. His patience was soon rewarded. Ten o’clock on the dot, the door opened and in they came with the usual loud banter peppered with expletives, and minus DS of course.

All three slid into the booth continuing their noisy chatter.

Suddenly, a loud cry and all three jumped from their seats simultaneously.

“Holy funk’in’ shit” yelled one as he pointed towards the table with the overturned sugar container lying on it and the finger, ring, Christmas tag lying next to it.

“What the fuck is that?” he continued.

Then they slowly moved back towards the table to get a better look at the mutated object.

Charlie rushed from the kitchen in response to the cries.

“Holy shit” he exclaimed with wide eyed amazement as he too viewed the severed appendage.

Jack turned on his stool to watch the show. On his face he wore a somber look while in his mind he wore a wide grin of amusement. He arose and quietly left the mayhem at the Lunch Box.

Jack felt a deep sense of pride. Although, some guilt over his actions periodically arose, ‘the ends justifies the means’ allowed him to immediately dismiss the little remorse he bore. One prick dead and the entire community saved, it was no contest, he thought to himself.

Was what he did wrong? God would have to decide that one.

Right now, he was sure he had made the correct decision and he felt damn good about it.

Several weeks passed and no reports of extortion were heard. It seems as if the Fireman had disappeared from the face of the Earth, or at least from the neighborhood. The darkness that had enveloped it seemed to have been lifted.

Although Jack felt great satisfaction about the demise of the Firemen and end of their parasitic hold, feelings of guilt had begun to reemerge. On several occasions, he had awakened in the middle of the night by visions of his murderous act. As the weeks went on, self recrimination became more frequent but each time he was able to dismiss it with the thoughts of the cleansing of the neighborhood that his act had accomplished.

He sat silently before the TV, paying little attention to its ramblings but instead, musing on his apparent success. A sense of self satisfaction mixed with guilt filled his thoughts.

Bang! Bang! A sharp knock rattled through the door. Jack sprang from his chair. He expected no visitors, especially at ten o'clock at night.

He hesitated.

Bang! Bang!

He slowly moved to the door and peered out through the peephole.

It was DFN at the door. Jack didn't know his real name, just that he had overheard DS call him that many times at the Lunch Box. DS used to say that he was his "Dumb Fuckin' Nigger" and so he called him DFN for short.

Jack pulled back from the peephole and called through the closed door.

"What do you want?"

"I just wanna talk, Man - just talk - nothin' else."

"Talk! Talk about what?", Jack replied.

"Well if ya open this door I'll tell ya. Can't be talkin' to no closed door out here."

Jack paused for a moment and then peered back through the peephole.

"Take off your shirt" he commanded.

"What?" came the reply.

"Take off your shirt and turn your pockets inside out and turn around" Jack repeated.

"Okay, Man" and DFN removed his shirt and stared back into the peephole.

DFN complied with a scowl and stood before the door.

Jack went to the kitchen, took a large knife from one of the drawer, returned holding it and cracked open the door while bracing his foot and shoulder against it.

Seeing no immediately response, he opened the door wider to admit DFN who entered carrying his shirt.

"Can I put my duds back on, Man?"

Jack nodded.

"So what's this all about" asked Jack as DFN redressed himself.

"I wanna talk, Man about what happened to DS."

"I don't know anything about it" answered Jack.

"I don't even know that anything happened. And who is DS anyway?" he continued naively.

"Come on Man, you don't have ta bullshit me. I know you know what happened. I saw ya."

Jack looked back at him with an involuntary look of surprise. He was so startled by what he had just heard that he couldn't have camouflaged his astonishment even if he had tried.

"What the hell are you talking about? Saw what?" he replied while knowing that his pretext was probably in vain.

"You know god damn well. Didn't I just say, 'don't bullshit me'?"

Jack paused and thought for a minute.

"Alright, let me hear what you think you know."

Man, what I do know is what I know.

Here's how it goes.

Ya know the kid that 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 that he knew ya.

Then I decided to tell him to watch ya, real careful like.

He saw ya when ya carried DS up to his place. Now, I don't know how DS got all fucked up like he was, but my boy did see ya carry him up. Then, after he saw ya leave he came and got me.

I went to his place, went in, and guess what? No DS!

Never did see the boy since, so what does that make a guy like me think?

Makes me think you had somethin' to do with him goin' disappeared.

Wouldn't ya think that if you was me?"

"If that's what you think and that's what you know how come you never told the rest of your FM gang because if you did I'm sure they would have come for me by now?" Jack questioned.

"I hated that motherfucker. I just 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 told and I'm sure he woulda. He was one mean dude.

After a while, he found out that I knew what he done. He got my sister alone one day and made her tell him that I knew. I guess he kinda felt that I knew somethin' cause of the way I looked at him all the time. I just couldn't help it if ya know what I mean, after what did.

Then, he put that Dumb Fuckin' Nigger tag on me. I suppose that to make the rest of 'em think I was stupid and anything I said wasn't really true just in case I went and told about what he done. That sure didn't make me like him any better."

"What's your real name?" Jack interrupted.

"Clyde, Clyde Johnson" he replied.

"So why did you stay in the FM then", asked Jack.

"You just didn't quit FM Man. Quit them and you quit livin' too."

"So why are you here talking to me now then?"

"Well, I gotta give you some stars. After two of our guys disappeared and after we got the two notes, you kinda scared everybody out.

It's one thing when you can see people comin' up on ya and another when it comes outta nowhere and they just go outta sight.

And I gotta tell ya, when DS's dead ass finger jumped outtalk that sugar bowl that was tops, Man. That really scared the shit outta everybody including me.

That was some great shit, Man.

Guys where startin' ghost talk and spook shit and it freaked 'em all out.

That's why they gave up the fire protection shit round here.

Me, I didn't believe any of that silly spook shit cause like I told you I knew about you and what you did.

Now ya see, this was my chance to get out of the FM and I took it. I told 'em all that I thought it was some kind spirit stuff and I was leavin' and not one of 'em tried to stop me or said any bad shit about me cause they was all more scared than I said I was."

"So why are you here now?" asked Jack.

"I know DS always carried lots of cash around with him. Like I mean a stack of bennies, maybe a few grand. I'm sure he musta had it with him when you got to him.

I think a piece of that should be mine, seein' as I kinda saved ya a lotta hurt by not tellin' on ya. I'm here to get it."

Jack sat silently before replying.

"What makes you think I've got it?"

"What makes me think ya don't?" answered Clyde.

There was a long pause.

"You have to give me a little more time. I don't have it right here" Jack replied.

Clyde paused and then spoke.

"I don't really believe ya but I'm gonna give a little more but not much. I'll be back tomorrow and don't think ya be getting' over on me. Just because I had that DNF tag hung on me don't mean it's true, cause it aint" said as he turned and left.

Jack quickly bolted the door, went into the kitchen, got a chair and wedged it against the door knob. He then went back into the kitchen, took the money packet from the freezer and recounted it.

"Eighty-eight hundred. It's still all there" he reassured himself, rewrapped it and put it back behind the peas.

"But now, what about Clyde?" he thought.

He walked to the living room, snapped on the TV and sat in front of it with a blind stare. The banter from the television droned in the background of his thoughts.

Suddenly, his trance like state was interrupted.

"James Wheeler has been released from prison after serving four months of his six month sentence. He pleaded guilty to malfeasance and embezzlement in the collapse of Tyron Industries early last year. The failure of Tyron cost thousands their jobs and their life savings.

Mr. Wheeler left Tacomy State Prison without comment. He is still suspected of depositing millions in off shore accounts hidden from attack by creditors and pension fund officials.

Wheeler with met by his wife and attorney and hustled into a waiting limo without uttering a single word.

We will have a complete special report on the Tyron Caper as it's called tonight at nine.

Now the weather with Mark B....."

"Son of a bitch" he thought.

"Fucking four months after ruining the lives of thousands!"

"Released from prison after serving four months", the words reverberated through his mind over and over.

He arose twice that night, each time going to the living room and sitting for an hour, attempting to regain his composure so that he might go back to sleep. Finally, after the third awakening he went to the medicine cabinet. Three milligrams of Xanax and sleep was his.

A restless night did little to cure the fire within him. He arose early the next morning and went straight to the corner candy store for the paper. Once at home, he read and reread the article over and over describing Wheeler's crimes and the details of his release.

The more he read, the more infuriated he again became. As the anxiety rose within him he realized that inaction could never soothe his anger.

He walked into the living and sat before the blank television with his familiar vacant stare.

"Spies are a most important element in war, because on them depends an army's ability to move - Sun Tzu, The Art of War", it came to him through his haze of rage.

Now, he had to clear his mind and think. He saw the pictures of Wheeler leaving his limo and entering his New York apartment building on television last night.

"The building looked so familiar, but where?" he thought.

He closed his eyes and strained to recall. Minutes passed.

"East seventy eighth! That's it! Up by the park" he remembered.

He'd been by it numerous times when he was a kid. Aunt Mildred lived up in that area. The building looked exactly the same on TV as it did then.

He sat for a moment, gloating in self satisfaction for having remembered it.

Chapter 13

He didn't know what to do next but Sun Tzu's words echoed and reechoed in his head as he boarded the bus to the City the following day. He arrived at East Seventy Eighth at seven A.M. and found a bench at the edge of the park just across from Wheeler's building. He took a small radio from his pocket put on its headphones and adjusted his sunglasses. There he sat waiting, but for what, he didn't really know. All he knew is that this was satisfying a deep seeded urge within him.

An hour passed, then two and three. A flow of people, although sporadically, entered and left the building. At ten twenty-seven a familiar image appeared in the doorway. It was Wheeler led by a small white dog on a leash. He exited the building, and turned left, walking slowly down the street stopping periodically as the dog carried on his sniffing and marking activities. He rounded the corner and walked down the street disappearing in the distance.

After ten minutes or so he reappeared rounding the opposite corner carrying a newspaper under one arm and reentered the building. Jack continued to wait. Morning soon became afternoon. At three seventeen, a petite, white haired woman exited the building with the same small, white dog in tow. She too turned the corner, walked down the same side street only to again reappear about ten minutes later and reenter the building.

Jack arose from his perch with legs cramped from the nearly eight hours of sitting and boarded the bus for home. As the bus meandered through the city back towards home, he thought.

"Now what?" he questioned himself.

The very next day he found himself in the same position, on the very same bench. It was as if he was compelled by some inner force. He found himself in a trance like state, acting independently of his own free will. He had to do what he had to do. He was driven by an unrelenting obsession within him. But for what ultimate purpose he didn't know. What urged him onward?

Was it revenge?

Justice?

Hatred?

Thrill?

Maybe just ego and fantasy?

He wasn't really sure. The only thing of which he was sure was that he must continue or never experience inner peace. It was a tormenting itch that had to be scratched.

He waited. Wheeler and the dog left the building again at exactly ten fifteen. The white haired woman and the dog again left at exactly three twelve. Jack once more rode back home on the twisting, lurching bus and again with no knowledge of what he would do next or why.

After a week of patient watching, it struck him. It was the perfect plan. Its execution would surely tame the angst that ceaselessly gnawed at his consciousness.

That evening, he sat motionless in the quiet of his living room, musing intently on the details of his plan.

Suddenly, a loud, solid rapping sounded at his apartment door. He peered through the tiny peep hole to see Clyde. He attached the chain latch and cracked open the door.

"I come for my money, Man. I sure hope you got it" he announced in a stern voice.

"Yeah, I got it" replied Jack as he released the latch and opened the door.

Clyde entered and stood solemnly in the doorway.

"One minute" said Jack as he turned and walked to the bedroom.

He returned to the living room to find Clyde holding a gun stretched at arms length, pointed straight at him.

"Hey Man, what the fuck is going on here?" exclaimed Jack in a startled tone.

"Wanted to make sure you're comin' back with the cash and nothing' else" he replied as he lowered his gun.

Jack handed him an envelope which Clyde immediately opened and began counting the money it contained.

"Forty two hundred, sounds about right" he said as he finished counting and stuffed the wade of bills into his pocket.

"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" he continued as he turned and walked towards the door.

"Wait a minute" said Jack as Clyde reached for the door knob.

"Wanta make some real money, real easy?"

Clyde turned immediately.

"Like how?" he asked.

"Come on in the kitchen and have a beer and I'll tell ya how" answered Jack.

He pulled two bottle from the fridge and they sat down at the table.

“Did you ever hear of James Wheeler?” asked Jack.

“Was I supposed to?” answered Clyde curiously.

“How about Tyron?” continued Jack.

“Never did. Never heard of neither” came the reply.

“I used to work for Tyron. Had a pretty good job there. 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 and stealing all the money but they couldn't make it stick. The Feds worked their asses off for over a year but couldn't come up with enough. The word was that he'd salted away a bunch of cash off shore but like I said 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 little shit and he only did a year and a half.

I saw him on TV about two week ago when he got released. He lives over in the city and I've been over there a bunch of times doin' some surveillance. I know he's got the money. I just know it. I got the feeling about that right down in my bones and I think I got a plan to get it or at least a good amount of it.”

“I like the sound of all that money but so where do I come in to this?” asked Clyde.

“Well, it's not only you, it's your little nephew too” answered Jack.

“You see Wheeler's got this dog. I know from when I worked there everybody said he liked the dog more than his old lady. He used to bring the dog to work with him on a regular basis. He had the dog with him when he interviewed people for jobs or promotions. The word was that if the dog didn't take to the guy right away, the guy didn't have a chance of getting the job. I guess he figured the dog had ESP or something.

So anyway, he's in love with the fucking dog, so my plan is to dognap the dog and ransom him back to Wheeler. If he comes up with the money than we can be pretty sure that he's got money squirreled away so where. If not, then we can be pretty sure that he's on the level about being broke.

If he does have the money the next step will be to figure out how to get more of it from him.”

“And how do you plan to do that?” asked Clyde.

“I'm not sure yet but I have some ideas. We'll worry about that when the time comes” answered Jack confidently.

“Let me get to Morris. He'll do what ever I say so it won't be any problem” said Clyde as rose from his stair.

“Who's Morris?” asked Jack.

“He's my little nephew” came the answer.

“Okay, bring him over early tomorrow morning and we'll go over the details” said Jack.

“He's a pretty smart little shit. He'll catch on real quick” replied Clyde as he left.

The next morning Clyde arrived at Jack's with Morris in tow. They sat and

talked for a short time and then Jack and Morris boarded the bus to the city. When they arrived at Wheeler's apartment building, both sat on the bench across the street and waited.

Soon, Wheeler exited the building with the dog in the lead, right on schedule. Morris left his seat next to Jack and crossed the street. He walked up the block approaching Wheeler.

"Oh, mister, what a cutie little doggie. Can I pet him" announced Morris as he stooped over and reached towards the dog.

Wheeler stopped.

"Sure Sonny. He likes being petted" answered Wheeler.

"I sure wish I had a dog like him. What's his name?"

"Sparky."

"Sparky. That's a cool name" said Morris as he stroked the dog's back.

"I like Sparky. Can I come and see him again tomorrow?" asked Morris.

"I think Sparky likes you too. See his tail going? I'm sure he wants to see you again tomorrow. We'll be here the same time tomorrow" Wheeler assured and with that continued down the street.

With Wheeler out of sight, Morris walked back to the bench.

"Good job" announced Jack and they headed back home.

For the next few days Jack and Morris rode to the city and each time Morris engaged Wheeler and Sparky in playful conversation as Jack waited and watched.

On the fourth day Morris again met Wheeler and Sparky.

"Sparky, here's your friend Morris" Wheeler announced with a broad smile as they approached each other.

Morris bent over to pet the dog as usual but this time he held a cutting pliers carefully concealed in his left hand. After several strokes of Sparky's head he reached out and cut the leash, scooped up the dog and ran full tilt down the block and around the corner.

Wheeler stood frozen with surprise for a moment and then feebly attempted to chase the pair.

Morris rounded the second corner and there stood Jack in the alley with a small pull luggage bag and a roll of duct tape. He proceeded to tape the dog's mouth and feet. He then stuffed Sparky into the open bag and zipped it shut. With that done, he and Morris walked to the bus stop, pulling the bag containing the squirming dog inside. They waited for a bus carrying only a few passengers and entered through the rear door. Jack sent Morris up to the driver to pay the fare while he seated himself in the back of the vehicle holding the bag between his knees. As they rode Sparky's wriggling became more and more subdued.

They arrived back to Jack's house and once there, unzipped the bag. He reached in and withdrew the dog. It was limp with eyes closed. Jack immediately removed the tape from Sparky's mouth and the dog remained motionless.

Morris reached over to touch the dog's head. Jack reflexively pulled the flaccid body away from the intended caress.

"He's dead" yelled Morris.

"Sparky's dead" he wailed again.

Jack sat motionless, holding the lifeless dog and watched Morris sob quietly with tears trickling down his cheeks.

Jack said nothing. What was there to say. He carried the body into the kitchen, slipped it into a plastic garbage bag and fitted it on the lower shelf of the refrigerator. He then returned to Morris who was still seated in the living room, head bowed, next to the opened suitcase.

"Hey kid, we didn't mean to do it. It just happened" whispered Jack while putting his hand on the kid's shoulder.

Morris looked up.

"I know but I loved Sparky and I even thought if Mr. Wheeler wouldn't buy him back I coulda kept him. I thought about that a lot."

"I know kid but there's nothing that we can do now" answered Jack in a soothing voice.

"We just gotta keep doing what we planned. We sure don't want Sparky's death to but for nothing, do we?" Jack cajoled.

"Now go get your uncle. I want to talk with him" Jack commanded.

An hour later they arrived at the apartment. Jack pulled the garbage bag from the refrigerator and showed Clyde Sparky's remains.

"What the fuck are we gonna do now?" responded Clyde.

"I say we go through with the whole thing as planned" answered Jack.

"We don't have to say shit about the dog being dead and he won't know until it's time for us to get the money" he continued.

"What's gonna happen then?" asked Clyde.

"Who knows and who cares. We got the money then and its game over" Jack replied.

"Well I guess. We'll send the kid with the note tomorrow then, right?" answered Clyde.

"Yeah, business as planned" answered Jack reassuringly.

With that they both sat at the kitchen table and composed the note.

"If you want your dog back, be at Winter's Park, in the woods at the edge of the ball field at seven o'clock on Wednesday night. Bring ten thousand dollars with you. I'll bring the dog, a can of gasoline and a match for Sparky just in case you don't show up, don't come alone or don't bring the money."

The next morning Jack and Morris left for the city. When they arrived at Wheeler's apartment Morris immediately walked up to the doorman.

"This is for Mr. Wheeler" Morris announced as he handed him the note and then turned and ran off down the street.

Now all they could do was wait. Wheeler had three days to come up with the money and if Jack's suspicions were correct, he should have no problem raising it.

Time passed slowly and fear nagged at him incessantly.

"What if Wheeler called the cops?" he thought over and over.

Each time he immediately attempted to calm himself

"No, he would never do that. He loved the dog way too much to take any chances and besides if he really did hide all the money that he was said to have, ten thousand would be a drop in the bucket. It certainly wouldn't be enough to get

him to risk the dog's life especially by the horrible means Jack's note had implied."

"What if Wheeler came armed? He remembered that it was well known that he had been in Marines in Vietnam. He had several pictures of himself with his army buddies on the walls of his office at Tyron. He often spoke of them, most of which never made it home with him."

"I'll definitely bring Clyde and his equipment as he liked to call it, a three fifty seven. If there is any trouble, a big black guy with a big gun stepping out of the shadows, should surely solve the problem" he consoled himself.

Wednesday night finally came. It was cold and dreary with a light rain just had been predicted. Jack was sure that the weather, darkness and the isolated location in the park insured the secrecy of their meeting. He and Clyde left early and arrived at six forty-five.

There they waited nervously, huddled beneath the trees. Within minutes the outline of an approaching figure moved across the open expanse of the open ball field. Jack squinted hard in the dim light trying to make out his identity.

"It's Wheeler" he whispered to Clyde. They both moved out from the trees to an open spot at the edge of the field.

"Wheeler! Is that you" spoke Jack.

"Yes" came the answer.

"Did you bring it?" asked Jack.

"No" replied Wheeler hesitantly.

"No!" repeated Clyde with surprise.

"How do you think your gonna get your fuckin' dog back then?"

"I hope this aint no trick. If it is we're gonna have a hot dog roast right here and now" Clyde continued.

"No trick. I just don't have the money" answered Wheeler.

"What about all that money that you hid when your company collapsed?" Jack asked sternly.

"I never had any money hidden. I lost my ass like everybody else. The only people that got anything out of that whole deal were the lawyers. They picked the bones clean with all their legal shit.

When the rumor went around that I and a couple of the other execs stole some money and hid it, that was just a lot of bull shit. The papers just love that kind of stuff. It sells papers like the truth never could.

I brought eight hundred with me. That's all I could come with. That's all I got" he continued as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small manila envelope.

"How is it your livin' a fancy building with a doorman and all if you aint got no money" questioned Clyde.

"That's no fancy building. The elevator doesn't even work. It been broken for a month now and the doorman, he's no doorman. He's a rent-a-cop. He's only been there since I moved in.

I've had a couple of death threats by people that think I screwed them and stole the money out of Tyron. The guy who owns the building is a friend of mine and he hired cop to give me the feeling of a little security until the whole thing

blows over.”

There was a silence. Then Wheeler spoke.

“So what about Sparky? Will you give him to me?” asked Wheeler in a pleading voice.

Again silence.

“Listen! Just give him to me and I’ll try to get some more money, honest. Just take this now, give him to me and tell me where to leave the next money when I get it. I’ll leave it, I swear.”

Clyde walked over to Wheeler, took the envelope from him and stepped back.

Again, a brief silence.

“Come on man, you may as well tell him” exclaimed Clyde.

More silence.

“Okay, the fuckin’ dog’s dead!” shouted Clyde with frustration at Jack’s unwillingness to speak.

Wheeler just stood frozen for a moment with head bowed.

Then, he raised his eyes in a cold stare at Jack and in a loud angry voice, cried “Dead. Sparky’s dead”.

“Listen, we didn’t mean to hurt him” began Jack.

Suddenly Wheeler reached beneath his raincoat, drew out a large army knife and lunged towards Jack.

“You motherfuckers killed my Sparky” he yelled as he slashed, slicing into Jack’s coat at the left forearm.

Clyde immediately pulled the three fifty seven, its muzzle wrapped with newspaper, from under his slicker and fired. A short, muffled pop and Wheeler fell still at Jack’s feet. A slight trickle of blood began to ooze from the hole in middle of the yellow raincoat. It streamed over his chest and ran down his side, mixing with the puddled water on the ground beside the body.

Jack looked down at Wheeler in shock.

“I think you killed him” he said in a slow stunned whisper.

Clyde bent over and lifted Wheeler’s arm and felt for a pulse. Then he released it. It fell like a stone.

“Yeah, he’s dead okay.

I didn’t have any choice. If I didn’t shot him he woulda sliced you right up. The man just went crazy. I saved you, man. If it wasn’t for me you’d be the guy layin’ there in that mud.”

“And all this shit for a lousy eight hundred bucks” he added with disgust.

“What the fuck are we going to do now?” asked Jack.

“We can’t just leave him here” exclaimed Clyde.

“Why not” replied Jack.

“Look if we leave him they’ll starting lookin’ for who killed him right away” explained Clyde.

“So what? How will they ever know we did it?” answered Jack.

Clyde turned towards with a stern look.

“Man, you know how many guys I seen think they’d never get caught and they still got tagged?”

If we get rid of him the cops will just think he just left town with the money he stashed away and they'll be lookin' for him, not us. They might even be lookin' for him in some foreign country cause everybody thinks that's where he hid the cash.

If they never find the body they won't never even know he's dead. They'll never be lookin' for who did it."

Jack thought for a moment.

"Clyde, for a guy who they called dumb, I've 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. I never did see DS again after you got done with him" remarked Clyde.

"Let's pull him over here and cover him up a little just in case somebody just happens by" suggested Jack.

With that they together dragged Wheeler under an adjacent cluster of bushes and covered him with several hands full of leaves.

Jack pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed.

"Petey - Jack - Listen do you think you can help me out?" he asked.

"Can you bring your car and some garbage bags and pick me up over here on Fifth Street by the park?"

"What's going on?" came Petey's reply.

"I'll explain more when you get here" Jack answered confidently.

"Okay, I'll be there in ten or fifteen over by the park entrance."

Jack hung up the phone and turned to Clyde.

"Is he gonna come?" asked Clyde.

"God damn right he's gonna come. No problem. He's seen me in action and I kinda think he's scared shitless of me. He's do what ever I tell him" answered Jack with an air arrogance.

"You wait here and make sure nobody comes snoopin' by. I'll go meet him and get the bags. We'll slide him in and carry him out to the car" said Jack.

"Then what?" replied Clyde.

"Tomorrow we'll go fishing" answered Jack as he turned and walked towards the park entrance to meet Petey.

"Go fishin'?" Clyde muttered to himself.

Clyde stood, perplexed at Jack's reply as Jack retreated into the shadows.

After several minutes of waiting, Petey's old Toyota pulled up to the curb.

"Gimme the bags and wait here" yelled to Petey through the open passenger window.

Petey motioned to the pile of bags on the seat. Jack reached in, grabbed them and disappeared back into the darkness.

Soon Jack and Clyde emerged through the mist. Clyde had Wheeler's bag wrapped body slung over one shoulder.

"Open the trunk" Jack instructed and the deck lid popped.

Jack raised the lid to see the crowded trunk..

"What's all this shit you got in here?" he snarled and slammed the lid back shut.

"Open the back door" he again commanded.

“Put him in here” gestured to Clyde who obligingly slid the body into the back seat.

“Get in and let’s go.”

Clyde paused for a moment to get his breath and then he walked to the other side of the car and got in the back seat next to Wheeler’s lumped form. Jack got in the front next to Petey and the car lurched forward.

“What the fuck’s going on? What’s in the bag?” asked Petey as they drove towards home.

“Have to take a ride to Larry’s tomorrow morning - early” replied Jack.

“Holy shit! You got to be kiddin’ Not again!” answered Petey in dismay.

Jack’s reply made Petey obviously nervous. He grasp the steering wheel with both hands and bowed his head forward.

He chastised himself as the ride continued. How did he get himself into this in the first place Petey questioned himself over and over.

“Well, it’s too late now” he thought to himself. He certainly wasn’t about to confront Jack.

When they got back to Petey’s place they cleaned out the trunk and stuffed Wheeler’s garbage bag clad body into it.

“See ya in the mornin’ light, about six. Call Larry and tell him we’re comin’”

With that the three left Petey’s make-shift hearse for the night.

Chapter 14

The morning the sun shone brightly as Jack made his way over to Petey’s. He immediately walked to the back of the building to check the car and make sure it was undisturbed. He then called Petey.

“I’m by the car. Let’s go” he said and hung up.

Several minutes later they were on their way to Larry’s.

They rode quietly, each uneasily contemplating the task lying ahead. After a prolonged silence, Petey spoke.

“I kinda thought the Firemen were a done deal after our last trip to Larry’s. I haven’t seen hide nor hair of them around the neighborhood since. I thought we scared ‘em all off” he began.

Jack said nothing.

“Which one is the guy in the trunk?” continued Petey.

Again Jack failed to reply.

“You okay Jack?”

“Yeah I’m okay” answered Jack abruptly.

“Let’s just get up to Larry’s and get this over with” he added.

“Yeah, I know what you mean” said Petey and they continued their sober journey.

Soon the sign, “Larry’s Fishin’ Hole” loomed ahead. Petey turned down the long, dusty road. There again was Larry waiting on the porch, rocking slowly back and forth and puffing on short cigar stub.

“How ya doin’ boys?” announced Larry with a grin.

“I see ya brought me another one of your local pricks. How many more is it

going take before they catch on and get the fuck outta town on ya?" he continued.

"I'm guessin' their a bunch of dumb fucks, slow learners.

Jack's trying to teach 'em, aren't ya Jack?"

"But its just not sinkin' in!" Petey added.

Jack nodded slightly but said nothing.

"Let's have a couple beers before we finish this up. Kinda get our stomachs up for it if you know what I mean" said Larry as he disappeared into the house to retrieve three cold ones.

Several drinks later, the three got into Petey's car and rode to the pond. The bright yellow chipper sat next to the pond, like a grizzly monster awaiting its subsistence.

Petey popped the trunk and they pulled the garbage bagged form from it.

"Leave his face covered like before" exclaimed Petey.

"Come on Petey. Stop bein' a pussy" replied Larry and he slid the first bag from the corpse exposing Wheeler ashen face to the glaring sunlight.

Upon seeing it, Larry rose sharply from his bent stance stilling holding the bag.

"What the fuck is this?" he exclaimed.

"This aint no young punk!"

At the sight of Wheeler's face, Petey looked up at Jack with equal surprise.

"What's goin' on here?" asked Petey.

"Look, I was all for helpin' you guys get rid of those little pricks that are terrorizing your neighborhood but I'm not up for this kind of shit" said Larry sternly.

"Larry, I didn't know. I thought it was one of the gang like you did" explained Petey.

They both looked squarely a Jack awaiting his explanation.

"Did you ever hear of Tyron and the Tyron collapse?" asked Jack.

"Can't say as I did. I don't ever watch the news anymore. I can't deal with it. It just pisses me off too much. Aint watched it in years" answered Larry.

"I kinda remember somethin' about it. Sounds familiar anyway" added Petey.

Then Jack continued.

"Let me tell you the whole thing" began Jack and with that he blurted out the entire story. He began with the loss of his job at Tyron and ended with Clyde accidentally killing of Wheeler. Larry and Petey listened intently with little emotion.

Jack concluded and Larry spoke.

"Well, whatever the case, I guess we gotta get rid of him."

Larry proceeded to remove the bag from the lower part of the body. As he did, he continued to intensely peruse Wheeler's lifeless countenance.

"This guy look awful familiar for some reason" he muttered Larry to himself under his breath.

After a few minutes the body was disrobed and Larry pulled hard on the starter cord and the chipper roared to life. Jack and Larry raised the body onto the bed of the machine and it towards the whirling blades.

Again, as before, the machine did its gruesome task and a flurry of bright red, semi liquid pulp sprayed into the pond. It was met by churning water where it landed as the fish scrambled for their share of the ghoulish feast.

Within minutes, it was over, Wheeler had been consumed by the chipper, the spray ceased and the pond waters returned to their usual colorless calm.

Larry proceeded to wash down the machine while Jack picked up the pile of discarded clothing and carried it towards the rusty oil drum and threw it in for burning. The grim clean up completed they all piled back into Petey's car for the ride back to the house.

"Wait a minute" announced Larry.

"We gotta burn up the guy's duds. I sure don't want thing layin' around here" he said as reached for the car door handle.

"What did you find in his pockets?" asked Larry as fumbled to find a match.

"Holy shit! I put the clothes in the barrel and didn't even look. You would think I'd know better this time" replied Jack.

Larry walked to the barrel and pulled the clothes from it. He rifled through the pants pockets and withdrew a wallet and stuffed it into his own pocket. He then lit a match and ignited one of the sleeves of Wheelers shirt. When it was thoroughly aflame he dropped it and the rest of the clothing back into the barrel.

He got back into the car as smoke poured from the fiery container and they pulled away. Back at the house they sat silently on the porch each trying to clear his memory of the macabre task they had just completed. After several moments Jack broke the stillness.

"Larry - what did you find in the wallet?" he inquired.

Larry reached in his back pocket and pulled it out. He opened the money compartment and began to count.

"Twenty-three dollars!"

Then he slipped a small stack plastic cards from the other compartment and began to slowly shuffle through them.

"James Wheeler!" he announced in a startled voice.

"Yeah, that was his name" replied Jack.

Larry continued to stare at the card and then reached into another one of the wallet's compartments. He slid out a piece of laminated plastic containing a dark shriveled fragment. He stared at it intensely for a few moments and then grasp it tightly in his fist. Then, without a word, he rose and walked into the house.

Jack and Petey continued to sit on the porch. A few seconds later they heard the screen door slam behind them signaling Larry's return.

Suddenly, Petey heard the deafening blast of a shot gun blast. Jack lurched forward from his chair falling face down on the porch floor. Bits of hair, flesh and bone were scattered over the decking adjacent to his body and spurts of blood gushed from the huge hole in the back of his head.

Petey turned to see Larry standing in front of the doorway holding the still smoking shotgun by his side. He instinctively closed his eyes and raised his hands shielding his face from what he expected to be Larry's next shot.

Seconds passed and not a sound. He opened his eyes and slowly lowered his hands looking at Larry in astonishment as he did so.

“Don’t worry Petey I aint gonna shoot you” announced Larry.

Petey swallowed hard and squeezed out a terrified reply.

“What’s going on?

You just killed Jack!

Right out of the blue like that!

Why?”

Larry sat down in Jack’s empty seat.

“I had too” he answered, “I just had too.”

“What the fuck do you mean ‘Had too’?”

Larry held the small, laminated object that he had retrieved from Wheeler’s pocket for Petey to see.

“Know what this is?” he asked.

Petey leaned forward for a closer look.

“Can’t really tell. 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” replied Larry soberly.

“You mean you knew the guy we just shot into the pond?” asked Petey incredulously.

“Knew him? Shit yeah I knew him. He was Knotsy, my bud from Nam. When we first pulled him outta the bag I thought he looked familiar but I aint seen him in twenty-five years or more so I didn’t really totally recognize him.

Jack never did tell me his name so I never put anything together until I pulled his wallet outta his pants pocket and saw his name was Wheeler.

That was Knotsy’s last name - Wheeler.

And then when I found this I knew for sure it was him.”

There was a quiet and then Petey finally spoke.

“So why did you just kill Jack? He couldn’t have known that he Wheeler was your friend Knotsy” asked Petey.

“Don’t know. I guess it was just that old Nam thing.

It just came right over me. I just had too. It was like Jack, all of a sudden, looked just like that Cong that I shot outta the tree that day when everybody got killed ‘cept me and Knotsy.

I looked up at Jack a couple of times after I found Knotsy’s ear and each time I was hopin’ to see Jack but I just kept seein’ that Cong sniper’s face on him.

After lookin’ at him four or five times and seein’ the same thing it was like it hypnotized me. I could smell the jungle, hear the sounds and feel the heat . I just knew that I had to shoot him or that fuckin’ sniper would get me and Knotsy too. It was crazy but I had to do it” he concluded.

They continued to sit for a while and then proceeded to load Jack into the trunk of Petey’s car for the ride to pond.

Days passed.

It was Wednesday morning when the knock came on Petey’s door. He peered out through the peephole to see Clyde. He opened the door and Clyde entered.

“Petey, I aint seen Jack around lately. I went over to his place a couple of times but aint nobody there” he inquired.

Petey hesitated for a moment and then replied.
“Jack?
Jack went fishin’.”

END