

The Lost Hardboiled Stories

Copyright © 2004 David Alexander

I recently found a floppy disk containing story first drafts in various stages of completion. I'd forgotten all about these lost stories until I began re-reading them. The first two appear below. I'll be putting more up as time goes by.

Do Me a Favor

Traffic was light on the Manhattan Bridge into Brooklyn. After eight PM on a cold February night it usually was. Joey angled the Cougar over and passed a slow Daily News delivery truck coming in from the main depot in Queens and shot ahead, slowing when he was a few car lengths in the clear.

Checking his watch, he saw that he had fifteen minutes to park the Cougar on Elkenberry Street under the bridge. After that he'd walk the two blocks to the IND station at York Street and take the train back into Manhattan.

Again Joey replayed the reasons he was driving over the bridge tonight. As usual, the reasons had a lot to do with staying alive. That wasn't the way Fat Vito had put it at their meet the week before, but it was implicit when you were dealing with people like Fat Vito that you were all the way in.

Joey had met Frankie Marron's crew boss on the Cobble Hill Promenade so Marron could call due a favor. The wind whipped the fat man's thinning hair, exposing his naked skull. Out on the Hudson, two tugs were fighting the currents toward the Atlantic, hauling barges heaped with garbage for a landfill on Staten Island.

"I never thought, I mean..." Joey had protested. He'd expected to have to pay off with a favor some day. But he'd figured the favor would be more along the

lines of what a restaurant owner would be reasonably expected to do. Free meals, free drinks, things like that.

"Hey, Joey -- " Fat Vito said, putting out his hands like the Pope. "The cops had you molesting that kid, right? That's hard time in this state. We pulled some strings. You owe us, end of story. All you gotta do is pick up a Cougar with these plates at this address. You park it on Elkenberry and York in Brooklyn. That's it. You take the train home. We're even."

Joey had found the keys under the floor mat as Fat Vito had promised. He didn't know what was in the Cougar or who was picking it up and he didn't want to know. All Joey wanted to do was get it over with in a fat hurry.

Elkenberry was a mean street on a dark corner between one of the giant concrete abutments holding up the Brooklyn end of the Manhattan Bridge facing a vacant lot and some boarded up clapboard buildings. The developers hadn't hit on the neighborhood yet, tagged it with a classy sounding name to attract the yuppies who wanted to live within clamming distance of Wall Street, and started putting up sliver high-rises.

It was still a bombed-out reminder of the urban decay that afflicted the city in the last decades and that Joey knew would come back sooner or later. He pulled over to the curb and turned off the ignition. Bending over, he stuck the key in the dash.

A .38 was jammed up against the side of Joey's head when he sat back up again. A face behind the gun told him to put his hands on the dash and slide out, slow and easy. Two guys in tweed coats methodically patted him down against the side of the Cougar. They asked Joey where the keys were and he told them. One of the guys went around back and cracked the trunk. He gave a low whistle and called to his partner.

The other guy brought Joey around back and shone a flashlight into the trunk. It was full of plastic bags filled with a dark lumpy substance.

"Mexican tar," one of the guys said.

"Okay, Twinkie," the guy said to Joey. "You just bought yourself some bad trouble."

The other guy locked the trunk, replaced the key under the mat. A set of cuffs sailed off his hip.



The lights were on late at the District Attorney's office at 101 Center Street. Assistant DA Bob Piersoll sat at his desk and rubbed his beard. He needed a shave. Joey sat across from him. They had been in the office for the better part of an hour.

"Your only shot is you deal with us," Piersoll said. "We'll get you into the Federal Witness Protection Program. Once the wise guys got you Joey, they'll keep jerking your chain until you're flushed for good. Just like amortized property. After they use you up and squeeze you dry, they'll toss you away."

Somebody else added, "Permanently."

"We want Frankie Marron. We want that scuzzbag bad. You're gonna give him to us. If you want to stay alive, that is."

Piersoll spelled it out for Joey this way. They were building a case against Marron, but it wasn't solid. What they needed was a smoking gun. The wise guys were going to ask Joey for another favor. A bigger favor. And when they did come around, Joey would have to play it differently.

"When they pop the question, you say you want to hear it from Frankie the Fish, okay?"

"What if they never ask me again?" Joey returned. "What if this is the end of it?"

Piersoll shook his head and smiled knowingly.

"Bet your right arm they will Joey," he said. "Bet it like the sun will rise tomorrow."



Two Puerto Rican kids were sucking face against the black wrought iron parapet at the Cobble Hill Promenade. The sky showed its charred aluminum belly to the South Brooklyn waterfront. Joey hung over the edge eating a hotdog he'd bought from a vendor by the park outside, watching late morning traffic head toward the on-ramp for the Prospect Expressway and the two bridges beyond.

As Piersoll had predicted, another phone call had come from Marron's crew boss. They were jerking his chain and didn't care whether he knew it or not. The meet was set for the Promenade. Joey wondered if that was a favorite place or if Fat Vito had gotten it out of some bad crime movie.

"Hey Joey," Fat Vito said, taking up a position on the parapet railing. "Sorry I'm late. Fuckin' traffic over the bridge." He flicked his thumb under his front teeth. "*Fa' brutta*, you know what I mean?" Fat Vito spat on the pavement. "So anyways, the boss says he'd like you to help us out just one more time."

"Look," Joey said to him. "You told me I'd have to do it once and that was it, right?"

Fat Vito nodded like he was in complete sympathy with Joey's position.

"I know, I know," he said, spreading his hands. "But this is important. Mr. M. asked personal." Fat Vito put his hand on Joey's shoulder. "Mr. M. understands the situation. He told me to tell you there's a grand in it for you this time. He don't expect you to do something for nothing."

"What if I say no?"

Fat Vito's brown eyes stared straight into Joey's. There was a sadness in them, as if Joey were a little kid who'd just said something so incredibly dumb that it made Vito feel ashamed to have even heard it.

"Don't even think about it Joey," he replied. "Nobody says no to Mr. M., okay? Bigger guys than you, guys with a button, they do Mr. M. favors. When he says jump, all they want to know is how high."

Joey stared right back into the wise guy's face. He felt like spitting into that face. Here was a guy who was using him. Talking to him like he was a five-year-old.

"I want to hear it from Mr. M Direct."

"Hey, Joey. You know what you're asking?" Fat Vito challenged.

Joey nodded. "That's my bottom line. You tell Mr. M I don't mean no disrespect, but I got to know what I'm dealing with. If he wants me to do something, that's okay. But I got to hear it coming from him."

Fat Vito's face didn't even twitch. He threw up his hands.

"Okay Joey," he said.

Vito turned and walked down the Promenade. Joey watched his back get smaller and smaller until he faded into the polluted grayness that blanketed everything else in sight.



The wire was taped to Joey's stomach. It was lightweight and small yet he felt like anybody could see it through his clothes. He'd called the special number Piersoll had given him after another one of Marron's soldiers made contact by phone. The transmitter would transmit whatever was said to a van equipped with recording devices. The mobile receiving station was parked a few blocks from the restaurant on Thompson Street where the meet was to be made.

A sign over the storefront with black painted windows read GOLD STAR IMPORTS. Joey rang the buzzer and the door opened. Two guys in bowling shirts who outsized and outweighed Joey by about five inches and fifty pounds opened it.

"Mr. M's expecting me," Joey said.

"This way," one of the guys said.

Joey was taken into a back room where there were a couple of empty tables. A radio played Neapolitan music. Two caged canaries by the windows twittered away like nothing mattered. The walls were hung

with sports trophies and a few cheap paintings, mostly boating scenes. Mr. M didn't go in for religion at the Place.

Frankie "the Fish" Marron sat sipping an espresso at a table to one side. It was so heavily sugared you could practically stand a spoon in it. Laid out in front of him was a copy of *Il Progresso*, turned to the sports page. Marron was a fat man with bugging eyes who wore a dark suit and a white shirt with an open-necked collar. The hair was thinning on top.

"You want I should pat him down boss?" one of the gorillas asked.

Marron laughed.

"Hey, you wearing a wire Joey?" His eyes bored into Joey's. Joey tried not to sweat. He knew if he did it would be all over. They'd find him in the trunk of a car parked in Howard Beach, outside JFK airport, or maybe in two oil barrels, since you couldn't fit an entire body into a single drum.

"Sure I'm wearing a wire," he returned. "It's between my balls."

For a few seconds Marron's expression changed. He looked like he was about to explode. Then it passed. Marron laughed and waved the goons away. In that moment of terror Joey knew that he had come within an inch of death. He also knew, with a cold certainly of dread, that his days on earth were numbered.

"Okay, Joey," Marron said. "I want to tell you something. You really got no right to go over my crew boss's head. What he says to you, comes directly from me. You understand?" Marron didn't wait for a response. "Now I only agreed to see you today out of respect for your cousin Rosalie, okay?"

"If not for that I'd call you a punk because you don't know how to do business with people, you don't know the right way to act. So in the future, if Vito comes to you and asks you for a favor in my name, you can bet your fucking balls it comes right down from me, *capisc'?*"

"Okay," he went on. "You're a good guy and you understand. Now I'm gonna tell you what I want. It's simple. There's a guy we want to talk to. He's been hiding out because he thinks we mean him harm,

but that ain't the way it is. This guy you know. We want you to tell him to meet you at a certain place which Vito will tell you about. You get him there and you go. End of story."

Joey left the club not knowing if the cops in the surveillance truck had picked up anything from the wire. He was too scared shitless to care if they had.



Ordering a scotch and soda, Joey sat in a restaurant on Eldridge Street. It was late afternoon and the customers were sparse.

The guy he was supposed to meet came in. They sat down and had an espresso.

"You wanted to talk, Joey," the guy said. "Okay, so talk. I only got five minutes."

Joey gave the signal to the two truckers sitting at the lunch counter drinking cups of coffee.

"I wanted to tell you about something I heard on the street. Marron's gunning for your ass. But first I got to take a leak. Drank too much coffee before you came." Joey got up to use the john.

The two truckers at the counter whipped out MAC 10 submachineguns. The Ingrams could empty their 30 round clips of .45 caliber bullets in just under two seconds.

"Freeze!" the mom and pop act behind the counter had two Glocks pointed at the hit team's heads. At this range they couldn't miss. The buttonmen dropped the automatic weapons as ordered.

Joey walked out of the john and found his guy cowering under the table.

"You can get up now," he said.



Denver was nice this time of year. It was always nice, in fact. You could go to a bar and have yourself a quiet drink.

You could shop at any of three convenient nearby malls. You could play miniature golf and pray at conveniently located houses of worship. Sure, it got boring after a while, but you could get used to that, and it beat rolling in the mucky bottom of the Hudson off the South Brooklyn piers.

Joey liked coming to one particular bar in the downtown area. He came there a lot. Tonight he had sat talking to the bartender; business was light and the place had emptied fairly quickly. By now it was getting late and he had to go.

Paul Fordman was the new name the feds had given him. It went along with the new face, the subdivision tract home in the suburbs and a new social security number. Joey Fontana was gone. Completely gone. Straight out of Brooklyn. Permanently.

The parking lot was dark. Joey searched for his keys. He didn't see two guys come up behind him. One forced him into his car.

"Drive, you punk," the guy said.

When they took him far beyond the highway, one of the guys told Joey to get out. They made him kneel and bound his arms behind his back with Chinese thumb-cuffs.

One of the guys produced a sawed off Benelli 30 ought 6 shotgun. He put the barrel against Joey's head. The blast blew most of it off at the neck. The headless torso slumped forward. Blood pumped furiously at first into the dirt, then it stopped.

The killer threw the shotgun into the back of the car and then he and the other guy drove off.



He picked up the phone on the first ring. He was afraid. But he was more afraid not to. They'd done him a favor. He had known he would one day have to repay it.

He'd hoped what he'd told them about seeing Joey had been enough. He was

sorry he'd gotten into this. But he was trapped. Now there was nothing left but to play their game. And they held all the cards.

"Yo, Eddie," the voice on the line in New York said. "Mr. M says he appreciates what you done for him." There was a pause. "Now we're even," the voice concluded. There was a loud click and the line went dead.

Thank God, the man thought to himself. Thank God it's all over. He went back to the bar and began polishing glasses. 📖

The Man With Fred's Face

Wallace O'Toole sat on a bench in Humboldt Park and stared out of rheumy eyes. He didn't notice the well-dressed businessman sit down beside him. His eyes and his hearing had gone after years on the skids. So had his mind, for that matter.

"Ye talkin' to me, chief?" Wallace asked as the businessman offered him a smoke.

The businessman smiled.

"How'd you like a thick, juicy Porterhouse steak swimming in gravy, with mashed potatoes on the side and all the beer you can drink, pops?"

"You on the level? You ain't playing games with me are you, chief?"

"I don't have time for games. I'm about to eat and I don't like eating alone. I like talking to people. If you don't mind me saying so, I have the feeling you could tell me some interesting stories. It would be worth the lunch. I'm a writer."

"Sorry. I thought you were playing with me," Wallace said. "You'll get your money's worth, mister. I got stories to tell could fill a book."

As Fred watched Wallace eat at a nearby Brew 'N Burger on Chicago's East Side, he again mentally went over the details of his plan. The old wino was the

right age, height and build, and most importantly, he almost certainly wouldn't be missed. Wallace had told Fred that all his immediate family were dead. He had no relatives and no friends.

"More beer?" Fred asked and Wallace held out his glass stein. Fred emptied the pitcher and called the waitress over for a refill. A little over an hour before, Fred had made his regular call to his wife Marsha in Los Angeles, and as usual, knew she had some young Sunset Strip gigolo in bed with her. The thought filled him with a rage that made his fists clench involuntarily and his jowls quiver. Fred quickly relaxed and glanced around. Nobody had noticed. The waitress was occupied at an adjacent table. The wino was tucking into his steak like a man who hadn't eaten in days, probably because he hadn't. At least, Fred consoled himself, the old guy will be sent off with a full belly.

Wallace looked up suddenly.

"Beer makes me gotta go," he announced, and shoved off to the john. Fred again glanced around and, satisfied nobody was watching, removed a vial of indigo powder from his pocket and emptied it into Wallace's beer.

Propranolol, he'd read, was like a sword which cut both ways. Marketed under the common name Inderol, it was a beta-blocker which reduced blood pressure, prescribed to millions of Americans. In quantities greater than 500 milligrams, however, it brought on severe heart attack-like spasms quickly after ingestion. The dose Fred had just emptied into Wallace's beer was five thousand milligrams. Guaranteed lethal. Fred had carefully and diligently ground ten spansules of the drug to a powder fine as dust. He'd tested it in beer; it dissolved fast, mixed nearly invisibly.

"Still thirsty?" Fred asked on the wino's return. Wallace nodded, downed his beer, belched loudly and motioned for Fred to refill his glass. So far he hadn't told Fred anything that sounded like a story. Fred didn't remind him of the boast he'd made on the park bench.



The rented Ford Fred drove handled well as he sped it North along Lake Shore Drive, toward the suburban bedroom community of Skokie. Beside him, Wallace O'Toole's corpse sat with its head thrown back and its mouth hanging open. He looked asleep, Fred mused, and in a way he was asleep; permanently asleep.

The stuff sure worked fast. The bum had clutched his chest almost immediately after exiting the Brew 'N Burger and died in a single paroxysm a few minutes later. Fred thought to himself that he'd actually done the old wino a favor by putting him out of his misery. Death had life beat any day of the week when you hit the skids as bad as this puppy had done.

Now Fred turned the car into a quiet side-road, continued in low gear for some minutes, then stopped and killed the engine. He searched through the wino's pockets, finding nothing. Then he removed his wedding ring and slipped it over the wino's finger. Fred next placed his money clip in the wino's pocket along with his wallet and credit cards. It was a one-of-a-kind item, an antique made of ivory and gold sandwiched together. Fred had carried it around for years; a gift from his wife, it was one of his personal trademarks. He hated to see it go, but it couldn't be helped; it all had to look as convincing as possible.

Next he unstrapped his gold Rolex Oyster and strapped it to the wino's wrist. He hated parting with that watch too, but it was regrettably necessary. Adios muchachos. He'd see them in his dreams.

Fred next got out the rag and lighter fluid he'd brought along. He stuffed the rag into the gas tank, squirted on some fluid, lit it and ran as fast as his legs could carry him. The explosion was deafening -- Fred felt a wave of heat scorch the back of his neck as a fireball incinerated the car and the corpse inside it.



Doctor Gustav Janks, a native of Berne, Switzerland, had lost his license to practice medicine in 1985 after a particularly badly botched abortion which had left his patient a mutilated cripple for the rest of her life. Since then, however, he did a flourishing business as a plastic surgeon with a very select clientele. Janks' clientele paid on a strictly cash basis, asked no questions and gave no answers when questions were put to them. Janks deposited his lucrative fees in a Bahamian bank, no longer wishing to do business with his native country's famous savings institutions which were no longer as discreet as they had once been.

Janks welcomed Fred into his office, which was tucked away in one of the commercial lofts of a waterfront factory building reached through a complicated maze of back alleys. Although seedy on the outside, Janks' operating facilities were among the finest anywhere in the world.

Janks had to provide the best. First, because the vast sums he charged his patients demanded the best, and second, because most of his clients, if dissatisfied with the results, might kill Janks as easily and with as little remorse as others might crush a cockroach beneath the heel of their shoe.

Fred had come across Janks' address only with great difficulty, asking around for months in seedy Chicago bars on his frequent business trips, greasing palms until the information was his. Fred had always worn work clothes and a false moustache on those occasions. No one would remember him. They'd remember his money, but not his face, which is what counted.

As Fred sat bare-chested on the doctor's examination table, Janks carefully scrutinized his face, took blood samples, checked his pulse, slid the cold steel probe of a stethoscope along his back, shoulders and chest.

"Jah," he finally concluded, pulling the black, cobra-headed rubber tubes from his ears. "A piece of the cake."

Fred listened to Janks explain how he would use a recently developed technique to remove tissue from Fred's buttocks and graft them to his face, promising that Fred's new face would not only be perfect in every respect, but age much more slowly and heal much more quickly. Radical new laser microsurgery would give him an entirely new set of fingerprints that would be perfect in every detail. Janks asked Fred how soon he would like to have it done.

"The sooner the better," Fred replied.

"Then we do it now, jah?" Janks said.

"Now?" Fred looked perplexed.

"Jah, now, as in right now," Janks answered with a laugh. "I have all the facilities right here at my disposal. You are in perfect health. And most of all," he was already plunging the tip of a hypo needle into the rubber stopper of an ampoule of clear fluid, "you have no time to waste." He poised with the hypo in the air. "It's your decision, of course."

Fred nodded slowly and Janks gave him the injection, explaining it was a scopolamine-like compound which produced a twilight sleep. A second needle contained a hypnotic drug that numbed all sensation. Soon, Fred felt himself seemingly leave his body and look down from a great height.

"Enjoy the trip, my friend," Janks said, his voice echoing from far off. "These drugs together produce quite vivid hallucinations in many subjects." Janks checked the patient's eyes. He was already out like a light. Jah, he thought. This would indeed be a piece of cake.

Fred found himself back in Rio, where the nights were long and the women were made for love. It didn't matter that Fred realized it was all an hallucination, as one part of his drugged brain insisted. What frightened him were the things he heard himself babbling into his nubile playmates' ears, whose faces had other people's behind them, as if they were translucent plastic masks.



Fred passed the time watching television in the surprisingly comfortable room the doctor had provided for his recovery. All of the personal property he'd brought with him seemed untouched, including the key to a locker at Chicago Station wherein he had stashed \$250,000 in cash, embezzled from his company. Janks had also provided copies of national newspapers published in the twenty-four hours that Fred had been unconscious.

A small item on page three of the Chicago Tribune related the discovery of the burning wreck and the incinerated corpse's identification as Fred W. Barnes of Los Angeles, California, from the items in its possession. The car wreckage had been so badly incinerated that forensic identification of the corpse through dental records was impossible. Fred had carefully questioned his intended victim on whether or not he'd had any injuries that might have resulted in broken bones or major surgery, even in childhood. The wino hadn't hesitated in answering that he'd never been sick a day in his entire life. Fred believed him; a man doesn't forget things like that, even after years of inebriation, and the homeless man had no reason to lie.

Fred threw down the paper and smiled. He'd pulled it off. The hardest part of the entire thing was already behind him. In a few days, he would retrieve the cash from the railway locker and fly to Brazil. Over there a quarter million U.S. dollars was still enough to set him up for life far from prying eyes. The only mystery was the locked door of a room down the hall from his own quarters. Fred's questions concerning it were met with evasive remarks from Janks about another patient he was treating.

On consideration, Fred didn't think it all that strange that Janks would be handling two or even more patients

simultaneously, and dismissed his unease as mere paranoia. Other than that, the next few days proved uneventful. Fred felt as though he were gathering strength before entering a new incarnation. As though he would soon be reborn into a brand new skin. He was anxious to leave and become that entirely different person, begin living his brand new life. He couldn't wait for the bandages to come off.



Janks removed his patient's bandages three days later. Fred looked into a dark, sinister face. The face of a killer, Fred thought. Yet, all in all, a handsome face. One, he was sure, with which he'd have no difficulty in attracting companionship for long, and otherwise lonely nights in the wilds of Amazonia.

That same afternoon, Fred left Janks' offices, shaking the doctor's hand. Minutes after Fred's departure, Janks' other patient stepped from his locked room.

"Very well done, doctor," he complimented.

Janks stared into the face he had created and inwardly shivered. This might ruin his reputation. In all likelihood he would have to disappear himself, after this episode. No matter, he had plenty of money stashed away -- enough to set himself up for the rest of his life if necessary. In Janks' case he already had a villa in Casablanca, Morocco. He'd go there using one of his forged passports.

Maybe, he mused, he'd open a bar.



Empty.

The train station locker in which Fred had stashed his money was empty. He immediately remembered the sex dream he'd

had while unconscious and suspected the information about the money stash had been retrieved from him by truth drugs. His next thought was that he might also have been set up. The hand clamping itself on his shoulder proved Fred correct. He had been set up.

"Venti Ugurlu," a voice said. "You are under arrest." The F. B. I. agent propped Fred up against the lockers and read him the Miranda while another expertly frisked him. Yeah, the killer's face, thought Fred, glimpsing his reflection on the locker's shiny surface.

At that moment, across town, a man with Fred's original face and fingerprints emerged from the hidden offices of Doctor Gustav Janks. The doctor's corpse lay sprawled across his desk, having been shot through the forehead at close range by a .22 caliber automatic, the trademark of international terrorist Venti Ugurlu.

In the case by his side, the man with Fred's face carried a quarter million dollars in cash. The cash, which had come from Fred's locker, would be discreetly returned to Fred's company. The company was large and very powerful. Fred was very important to it.

The dead man in the burnt wreckage of Fred's rented car, on the other hand, had had no power at all. He had been a nobody with no money. For the right price his death could easily be explained away as an unfortunate accident in which a drunken wino had hijacked Fred's vehicle and been killed himself when the car's gas tank exploded. Fred had been knocked cold in the scuffle and had suffered temporary amnesia. He'd been wandering in a daze for weeks.

It wasn't exactly Shakespearean tragedy but with enough palms greased it would probably fly. The American's wife, however, would no doubt prove a different challenge. While under the truth drugs, the American had divulged her decadent excesses with younger men and even other women. She would ultimately have to be dealt with in some more or less permanent way, though if she were half what Fred had said of her this might be somewhat later rather than sooner.

If nothing else, thought the man with Fred's face, this part of the job would pose quite an interesting if not pleasurable challenge. 📖

Vendetta

Note: This appeared in the Web mystery publication Without A Clue, which soon after mysteriously vanished. Since the story comes from the same disk of lost originals I'm including it here.

DA

The sign above the storefront read: Palermo Soccer Club. It was one of those cheap laminated signs with blue lettering on a white background. You wouldn't think that the storefront belonged to one of the heaviest of New York's five Mafia families.

"Yo, dis a private club," the gorilla who opened the door said. He was a big guy and he filled the doorway. Volpe jammed the noise-suppressed barrel of the KG/TEC 9-mm machine pistol into his gut and fired a three-round burst. The burst knocked him off his feet before he could say another word. As the buttonman fell sideways, Volpe pulled a Stingball antipersonnel grenade from the pocket of his leather jacket and lofted it into the room. He flattened against the window adjacent to the door. There was a muffled explosion and the sound of coughing.

Volpe stepped over the guy he'd nailed. From out of the smoke two beefy torpedoes came staggering toward him. The guy closest to him was coming out from behind the cappuccino bar. Blood ran down the side of his slablike face from a jagged head wound as he struggled to pull a silver Colt .45 from a pit holster under his jacket.

Volpe took off the left side of his face with two silenced rounds. He crumpled behind the bar. The second guy was the bigger mother of the two. He

came at Volpe with his arms extended like a grizzly. Volpe stitched his guts with a figure-four burst that split him open. But the guy didn't fall. He kept coming, cursing in Sicilian. Volpe sidestepped the Goliath, who stumbled head-first into a soda machine, slid to the floor and stayed there.

Bono was in the back room. He was sitting at a table. A plate of steak pizzaola had overturned into his lap. He stared at Volpe, trying to figure out who he was. Then his eyes locked in recognition.

"That mustache does a lot for your face," Bono said.

"That's the way they wear it out in Colorado," Volpe returned.

"Must be a lot of yellow scumbags in Colorado, Volpe," said Bono. "You playin' wit' fire. You know that? You blow me away and your life ain't worth shit, not no more."

"You're right.," Volpe agreed. "It isn't."

He blew Bono away with the remaining four rounds in the KG/TEC's clip. Bono's head disintegrated into a red mist. The arms were thrown out as the body fell backwards, tipping over the chair. Volpe checked his watch. The entire hit had gone down in just under seven minutes from start to finish. He pulled an incendiary grenade cluster from his other pocket. The cluster was wired to an LED timer preset to give him five minutes getaway time. Volpe punched in the timer key and left the storefront and got into the stolen Buick he'd parked down the block.

When he had rounded the corner onto 20th Avenue, Volpe heard the club go up in a deafening explosion. He could see the fireball in his rearview mirror. He'd stolen the Buick in Manhattan. Now he'd have to ditch it before it got too hot. He parked it by Washington Cemetery and walked two blocks to the IND elevated. A Manhattan-bound F train was pulling into the station as he climbed the stairs from the mezzanine level. Volpe got on and rode it into the city.

He got off at 23rd street and walked to the cheap hotel just off Third

Avenue he'd checked into. On the way he stopped at a liquor store and picked up a bottle of gin. He sat in his room pouring himself straight shots and thinking about his next moves. He resisted the urge to pull Donna and his kid's photo out of his wallet. It somehow wasn't the right thing. It was almost poetic justice that the booby trapped car that had turned them into human cinders had been meant for him.

When Volpe had been a freelance contract hit man for the mob, his specialty had been car bombs. The bomb that had sent them up in a fireball had been the kind he'd often used. A grenade taped to the inside of the driver's side door, re-fused for a one second delay. A foot length of nylon fishing line tied to the ring securing the cotter pin and the steering wheel. Opening the door set off the grenade. He'd been good at his work. The best. He wouldn't handle anything under a hundred fifty large. It cost seventy-five thou just to get him on the phone. Yeah, good. So good he made a fatal error. He got cocky and didn't even see the setup the feds had sprung until it was too late. They had Volpe dead bang.

As much as the feds wanted Volpe, they wanted Bono more. Under immunity, Volpe had testified before a grand jury indicting him under the RICO Act for racketeering and murder. But Bono's crew had gotten to the jury and he'd walked. The next thing he did was put out a contract on Volpe. Bono had contracted with somebody almost as good. A hitter known as the Black Death. Somehow, Volpe had been made, probably in one of the bars he frequented in Denver. The Black Death must have thought it was a nice touch to grease Volpe with his own specialty.

Ordinarily he would have taken the Ford to work that morning, but the wife's car was in the shop and he'd bussed to work. She had opened the passenger side door first and then the kid had started to climb in. When she'd opened her door, they'd both been taken out.

Volpe had come back in time to see the fire department hosing down the still burning wreck. A crowd of rubberneckers surrounded the coroner's wagon as they body-bagged the remains and carted them away. Neither of them had deserved to go that way. Maybe him, But not them.

Volpe had made Bono pay with his life for ordering the hit. Now there was the guy who had iced his family under Bono's orders to be dealt a joker. Unlike Volpe, the Black Death had Volpe's face, habits and patterns down. On the other hand, Volpe had nothing to go on to track the Black Death. Walking around and asking questions would only attract the wrong kind of attention.

The Black Death was the kind of operator who would fulfill his contract even if the guy who'd paid him was dead. Volpe might as well sit around scratching his ass and sniffing his fingers. The Black Death would come after him no matter what. Volpe had to assume that the Black Death had followed him to New York and was laying for him, ready to make the hit. His strategy had to be to present a moving target in order to smoke him out. It was a good way to get killed, but the only way to lure the Black Death out into the open.

Volpe elevatorized to the hotel lobby. The front man was watching a portable black-and-white TV that was blaring the news of Bono's murder. It was a little after 7 PM. A light drizzle was falling. Volpe turned up the collar of his jacket and walked east along Third Avenue. After a few blocks he felt a presence behind him.

He turned to see a tall guy in a ski mask come out of the shadows. A shiv gleamed in his fist. The punks had been loitering at the IND station entrance on the north side of the park, looking for an easy score. The smartly dressed woman coming out of one of the nearby office buildings fit the bill to a tee.

Volpe had scored a fast knockdown on the first would-be attacker with a series of closed-fist hand blow combinations that had simultaneously

dislocated the Ski Mask's jaw and broken his shoulder blade.

Punk Two, the smallest of the three, jumped some hedges and jackrabbited into the pitch blackness of the urban park. But the third punk, the tallest, strongest and meanest of the ripoff group, pulled a nine-inch Jamaican ratchet knife from a side pocket of his cargos.

A flick of the wrist and a gravity blade only slightly smaller than a machete snapped open, catching the glint of overhead streetlights along its flat end. Though it had been years since Volpe's special forces hand-to-hand combat training at Fort Benning, all his fighting reflexes came back as muscular memory took control.

"Gonna cut you, bitch," Punk Three promised, relishing the image as he feinted with the shiv.

The mother was good with a shiv; an artist, Volpe saw. Effortlessly flicking the buck knife open like he had done took a lot of practice. Good, yeah. But not good enough.

Volpe watched Punk Three's piss-colored eyes, knowing that when the eyes flicked downward, it would tell him when the shiv man went into a death strike. The blade dipped sideways almost at the same instant the punk's eyes swung down to Volpe's heart.

"Muthaf -- "

Volpe's forearm lashed out in a hard block and parry, as he grasped Punk Three's wrist and bent it sharply back against his chest, while his right foot simultaneously snap-kicked roundhouse back-heel combos into Punk Three's groin.

The urban badass let out a yelp as the gravity shiv clattered from his limp fingers and collapsed to Volpe's loafers. Punk Three rolled over, bleeding and puking, clutching his wounded genitals.

"Next time..." Volpe said over Punk Three's tortured body, as he put the knife's blade under his shoe and bent the handle upward until it broke with a sharp snap, "...hold the knife pointing

downward. It's a lot harder to block that way, homes."

Volpe was suddenly aware that a crowd of innocent bystanders had gathered. "Innocents" who had been nowhere to be found when the attack had been in progress.

"You alright, miss?" Volpe asked the attack's intended victim.

"Yeah," she answered. "I think so." She looked a little rocky. Volpe propped her against the building. "I live around here," she said. "Maybe you could help me home."

Volpe helped her walk the few blocks. She lived in a reconverted brownstone on Avenue C. Despite the yuppie presence, it was still mostly a rundown neighborhood. Old tenements dotted the landscape. She lived in a second floor walkup.

"I'm a model," she explained. "This is just until something better comes along."

Volpe nodded; yeah sure. The girl got out a bottle. "I don't know about you," she said. "But I need a drink." She poured them both two fingers of scotch in jelly jars.

"That's better," she said after knocking some back. "Look, I'd like you to stay," she went on, frankly holding Volpe's glance. "I'd like to have someone here tonight." She came close. Her lips brushed Volpe's. He needed someone too. "That's settled, then," she said, turning. "I'll be right back." She went into the bedroom to one side.

Volpe got up and looked in. The girl's naked white back was toward him. He raised the KG/TEC 9-mm pistol and fired. The round went in neatly between her shoulder blades. She spun. As she did, the gun in her hand discharged into the floor. The Black Death had been good. But Volpe had been better. 