

Brian Garfield

Death Sentence



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FOR

Jay Robert Nash, John McHugh,

Roger Ebert and Bill Granger

CHICAGO FRONT-PAGERS ALL;

WITH THANKS.

Lost is our old simplicity of times;
The world abounds with laws,
and teems with crimes

Pennsylvania Gazette,
Feb. 8, 1775

With ready-made opinions one
cannot judge of crime.
Its philosophy is a little more
complicated than people think.
It is acknowledged that
neither convict prisons
nor any system of hard labor
ever cured a criminal.

FYODOR DOSTOIEVSKY
The House of the Dead

THE GUNS pointed in every direction. They were strewn under glass and Paul Benjamin went the length of the counter studying them.

“Interested in handguns?”

The proprietor was hopeful not so much for a sale as for conversation. Paul recognized the inquisitive tone—guns were objects of beauty, artifacts; give the proprietor encouragement and he would wheel out his display of flintlocks from a back room.

The shop was heavy with oiled rifles and shotguns. Here and there a decorative sword; one corner grudgingly displayed fishing tackle; all the rest was guns.

The proprietor dragged a lame foot when he walked: perhaps his passion for firearms came from their lack of human imperfection. He had grey skin and little moist eyes and an apologetic smile. A recluse. If it weren't guns it would be a meticulous array of electric trains in his basement. Evidently he was Truett; that was the name painted on the front window.

Under the buzzing fluorescent tubes Paul's hand looked veined and pale. “Could I see that one?”

“The Webley?” Truett unlocked the back of the case.

“No—next to it. The .38?”

“This one you mean. The automatic.”

“Yes.”

“Smith and Wesson.” Truett put it on top of the case. “You know the weapon?”

“No....”

Truett slid a blotter cloth along the glass and overturned the pistol on it. “Takes your standard nine millimeter round.” He popped the magazine out of the handle and proffered the pistol.

Paul looked at it tentatively.

The ball of Truett's thumb massaged the side of the empty magazine. “A gun ought to be selected for its use. You mind if I ask what purpose you have in mind?”

Paul had the lie ready: it was glib on his tongue. “I've just moved out from New Jersey. My brother and I bought a radio and electronics shop down in Chicago. We're opening next week.”

“You want the gun under the counter against holdups, then.”

“We thought of buying two guns. A very small one that would fit in the back of the cash-register drawer, and a bigger one to keep under the counter.”

“Makes sense. Crime what it is today...” Truett retrieved the pistol and slid the magazine into it. “You don't want this one.”

“No?”

“Maybe you'll have kids wandering around the shop. You'd have to leave the chamber empty and the safety engaged. By the time you got it loaded and off safety the holdup men could shoot you fourteen times. Look here.”

Paul watched him grip the slide with his left hand.

“Assume that's a loaded magazine I just inserted. Here's what you've got to do before you can fire this thing. It takes two hands and it can't be done silently.”

Truett pulled the slide back. There was a metallic racket when springs shot it home.

“Now you've loaded a cartridge into the chamber and you've cocked the weapon. But you've still got to push the safety off with your thumb, like so.” Truett aimed the pistol at a wall. “Now you've

ready to shoot.”

He put it away under the glass. “Single-action automatic is not a good defense weapon. You want a good revolver, or a double-action automatic.”

“I see.”

“Now here’s a manstopper.” Truett’s voice was different. He lifted something from the case and held it flat on his palms like a reverential offering.

It had the beauty of extraordinary ugliness.

“Too bad it’s got the same disadvantages as that other automatic. But this is a collector’s item—I’ll lay odds you’ve never seen a Luger like this one. They only made a handful of these in forty-five caliber.”

Paul tried to put a polite show of interest on his face to mask his fascination. The .45 Luger had ugly lines: bulging tumors of dark steel. He felt mesmerized.

“A crook finds something like this pointed at his face, he might just faint from fear without you having to shoot at all.” Truett smiled but the smile was awry with unexpected cruelty. Paul stared at the Luger when Truett aimed it carefully past him into neutral shadows. It was like staring into the orifice of a cannon.

“Far as I know this is the only one like it this side of Los Angeles. Forty-five Lugers are like hen’s teeth.” Truett looked as if he wanted to caress it. “But you don’t want a piece like this for shot protection.” He put it away under the glass with great care; then he moved away. “I think I’ve got what you want. Somewhere here....”

Paul stood above the Luger and talked himself out of it. It was slow and it was too bulky, and above all it was noticeable. He needed something the reverse. Something anonymous, easily concealed, fast to use—a tree in a forest, untraceable because it was identical with ten thousand others. One like the gun he’d left behind in New York. A gun for killing.

He was thinking: I’m an ordinary middle-aged product of a middle-class life. Just like everybody else—born innocent and taught cowardice at an early age. We live our lives in fear. Only this thing has happened in me and I can’t accept that any more. They killed my daughter and my wife. And I’m here buying a gun because I will not be afraid of them any more. I’m a madman, or I’m the only sane man. And who’s to decide that?

Today he would buy the gun and tonight in the city he would hunt. It wasn’t the fever of a holy mission; he didn’t feel obsessed by any sort of fanaticism and it wasn’t pleasure to think about it. But it was something that ought to be done. To rid the streets of them so that perhaps the next man’s daughter might be spared. There was no joy in it: if you were a doctor you didn’t enjoy jabbing needles into people; but Carol and Esther were dead for all time and he had a duty to them.

Truett had found a cardboard box lined with crumpled crepe; fitted into it was a stubby revolver glossy with new blackness.

“Smith & Wesson Centennial. Five shots, hammerless, grip safety, compact, light, takes the thirty-eight special cartridge. Two-inch barrel, tapered sight and shrouded hammer to keep from snagging on your pocket or drawer. This is just about the safest revolver they make, in terms of leaving it loaded around small children. It can’t be fired unless it’s held in a proper grip, you see, you’ve got to squeeze the handle as well as the trigger. It can’t go off if it drops on the floor. I’d recommend this one.”

Paul tried it in his hand. It was as weightless as a child’s toy gun. He dredged a phrase from somewhere in his experience: “What about stopping power?”

“It’s the standard police cartridge. Of course you wouldn’t want to try long-range stunts with it, not with that short barrel, but a good shooter can hit a man thirty feet away with one of these pocket guns.”

and that's the longest you'd need inside a shop. It kicks like a mule, being so lightweight, but I guess you'd rather have a sore hand than a knife or a bullet in you. Now this is only a five-shot revolver, not a six-shooter, but that makes it less bulky and the piece can handle heavy powder loads because the bolt-cuts don't come over the centers of the chambers. It means you can use high-speed ammunition next thing to magnum load."

Truett went down the counter and found a box. There was a small flat pistol inside. Paul had seen something like it on a desk once and it had turned out to be a cigarette lighter.

"I recommend these for cash-register drawers. It's only a twenty-five caliber auto, but hollow-point loads are your answer and you've got to figure you'd only use it at point-blank range anyway. You'd still have to hit a vital spot to kill a man but a hollow-point would chew him up pretty bad wherever it hit him." Truett talked dispassionately and it was possible his expertise about anatomic damage came from articles in gun periodicals: he didn't look as if he had ever shot a human being. *But then I don't suppose I do either.*

"They say a real hard case would rather get drilled by a three fifty-seven magnum than by one of these with hollow-points. A big gun's likely to shoot straight through you and leave a clean hole. One of these doesn't pack enough power to go all the way through cartilage. You get one of these little bullets stuck in the middle of you and you're liable to die from the sepsis unless you get it removed and cleaned out by a good surgeon. A man who knows his guns will respect one of these when he finds it aimed at him."

Truett set the .25 toy beside the revolver and found boxes of ammunition. "Soft-nose hollow-points. They used to call them dum-dums—know why? They were originally made in a town in Indiana called Dum-Dum. These bullets literally explode inside the body."

"I'll want a few more boxes. For practice. My brother and I ought to go out and get the feel of the guns, I think. If we ever have to use them we'd better be familiar with them."

"That's always a good idea. Whereabouts is your shop?"

He had to think quickly. He didn't know Chicago yet; he'd only just arrived. He remembered the place where he'd bought the secondhand car: the row of car dealers and store-fronts. "Along Western Avenue," he said. "Just south of the Evanston line."

"I get a lot of customers like you. Haven't been in Illinois long enough to qualify for a firearm owner's identification card, so they come across the line here into Wisconsin. Silly damned law—anybody at all can get the permit but it's got that idiotic residency requirement. But I can't complain—it's been good for my business up here. Anyhow there's half a million *licensed* handguns in Chicago. Who do they think they're kidding?" Truett rummaged in the drawer and lifted out several boxes of cartridges. "If you know anybody in business on the North Side you might inquire about getting a guest membership at the Lincoln Park Gun Club. That's on Lake Shore Drive not far from your shop."

"Thanks. I'll ask around."

The .38 Centennial was a perfect pocket gun, he thought; it was small and it was clean with no jagged protuberances to catch on cloth. The tiny flat automatic could be hidden nearly anywhere—ideal for emergency reinforcement. It was a refinement that had occurred to him recently: what if the gun failed? He had to have a second gun.

"Anything else I can help you with?"

"No thanks. Wrap them up."

HE HAD TO fill out forms: Federal registration of the two guns. He'd anticipated it and the driver's license he showed Truett wasn't his own. It was a New Jersey license that had been among his late brother-in-law's effects and the three-year license still had two months to go before its expiration. Anyone who traced either of the guns to Robert Neuser of Piermont Road in Tenafly would find a dead end.

He carried the parcel out to his three-year-old Pontiac and placed it on the seat beside the gun cleaning kit he'd brought with him from New York. He turned the key and backed out of the parking space; it was starting to rain.

It was one of the small towns that had been by-passed by the new Interstate expressway, abandoned by travelers and left to wither: the motels needed paint and announced their vacancies hopelessly; a roadside diner had been boarded up.

It was a warm day for winter but the leafless trees were bleak against grey skies. Christmas bunting sagged across the street. He drove through the center of town and followed the patched road east. It two-laned across prairie farms and brought him at four o'clock to a ramp that merged into the southbound Interstate. He was across the line into Illinois in fifteen minutes' time and the rush-hour headlights swarmed in the opposite lanes by the time he crossed the suburb boundary between Lincolnwood and Chicago, wipers batting away the drizzle. He was trying to forget the things that had made him shriek.

He left the rain behind at the end of the expressway and drove aimlessly, not quite sure where he was until he passed the Water Tower and the John Hancock skyscraper and the Continental Plaza where he'd stayed his first two nights in Chicago; he made a turn and went along some one-way street to Lake Shore Drive and rolled south with the high-rises on his right. But when he reached the turn-off for his apartment building he went on by; he didn't want to go home yet. He drove past the lights of the Loop. It was time to have his first look at the South Side.

He drove slowly and impatient cars flashed past him in the outside lanes. There were flat patches of darkness between him and the city. Swamps? Railroad yards? Parks? In the night he couldn't tell. He stopped at a traffic light and when it changed he made a right turn on Balbo and found himself in the Loop: he'd left the Drive too soon. He jiggled left and found himself in a tangle of dead ends, butting against the railway switching yards.

On impulse he parked in a side street. It was a district of daytime commerce: everything was shut down and there were few lights. No one walked the curbs.

He unwrapped the parcel and loaded the guns. The Centennial went into his topcoat pocket; the .25 automatic into his hip pocket, no bigger nor heavier than a wallet. He put the cleaning kit and the boxes of ammunition under the front seat and locked the car when he got out.

The old rage simmered in him. At street corners he stopped and studied the signs, trying to memorize the intersections: he wanted to learn the city. Holden, Plymouth, Federal, LaSalle. Near the intersection of Michigan and Roosevelt he saw a long covered pedestrian bridge across the rail yard, high in the air and walled with glass. Tall covered stairs at either end gave access to it: a good place for a trap, he thought. He watched for ten minutes. If an innocent entered the trap would a predator follow? The interior of the bridge was visible from the street but the lighting was dim and there were deep shadows between overhead lamps where two or three of them had burned out: the dark place

where they liked to accost a mark. At the end of the ten minutes a man in working clothes entered the western staircase and Paul watched him appear at the top and make his long pilgrimage across the bridge but nothing interrupted the solitary journey and afterward Paul moved on, the damp wind biting his ears.

Esther.... Carol....

By eight he was back in the car driving south and the quality of the city changed with each block until he was in the ghetto. Funeral Home. Pool Hall. Social Club. Liquors. Cut-Rate Discount. Jesus Saves. He turned off the boulevard and rolled along a residential street parallel to it: three-story tenements, wooden fire-escape stairs hanging from their walls. Young dark people lounged under the street lamps and stared at his car as he crept past. *Come on. Come at me.* But they only watched, the insolence muted by motionlessness, and he had to drive on.

He made a right turn into a wide boulevard. A bus swished past; there wasn't much other traffic. He cruised west and the ghetto changed. Soul Food gave way to Tacos and Bodegas. He stopped at a red light and rolled the window down. An El train clattered faintly in the distance; from a bar came the juke-box thumpings of Spanish music. A souped-up car with enormous rear tires growled past him like a mutant insect. In the next block he parked, hungry, and went into a café and ate at the counter. He had discovered Mexican food in Arizona, where he'd got his first gun.

The Centennial was a familiar weight in his coat pocket; he'd felt vulnerable the past few days, empty-pocketed in the city.

The *chili relleno* was good; he washed it down with beer. He paid the fat woman and went back to the street. It was coming up on nine o'clock and getting colder. A Christmas banner across a drugstore said "*Feliz Navidad*" and three laughing men came out of a bar, one of them carrying a six-pack.

He got back in the car frustrated: he didn't know the city well enough. He drove in any direction, prowling.

He had no idea where he was but there was a map in the glove compartment and eventually he consulted it and found his way home; in the meantime he had to explore.

It was a bar on a dark street somewhere a bit north and west of the center of things: through the window it looked like a boisterous drunk crowd and not far down the street two men in shabby coats sat on porch steps watching the bar. Paul had only a glimpse of them when he drove past but it was as if he read their thoughts and when he reached the corner he turned out of their sight and searched for a place to park the car. He found a spot a block away and locked the doors and circled the block on foot. He stopped at the corner and waited while several cars drove by. When he looked past the corner he saw the front of the bar and if he stepped out a pace he could see the two young men on the stoop; he did it once and then faded back because he didn't want to alert them. They were still sitting there, passing a bottle back and forth between them—probably wine. But they were young and wiry under the tattered coats and the immobility of their features had given them away to him instantly: he knew them, he'd made a study of their kind and Chicago was no different from New York when it came to that subspecies.

He fixed the plan in his head and then stepped out into plain sight on the curb. He walked as if he were a little drunk; he didn't exaggerate it but he moved with slow deliberate care, a bit owlish, not staggering. He looked both ways and crossed the street briskly and tripped over the curb mounting the sidewalk; he made a show of gathering his dignity and went into the bar. He hadn't had to look at the two men on the stoop to know they'd been watching him.

There was a loud crush of celebrants. They were in shabby booths and three-deep at the bar. It was a plain saloon, at least fifty years old by the look of it and unchanged from its origins except for the

blown-up photographic posters on the walls: Brendan Behan and Eugene O'Neill and someone whose face Paul didn't recognize—probably an Irish Republican patriot from the 1920s; the room dripped with Irish accents and there was no mistaking the lilt of the ebullient shouts that exploded from the knot of fat men at the far end of the bar. A barmaid in a red wig elbowed past him with a tray of beer.

He stationed himself near the window where the two men across the street could see his back. He ordered ginger ales and drank them quickly, three in succession, and was buttonholed by two loudmouths who demanded that he settle an argument about Catfish Hunter. He pleaded ignorance and was flooded immediately with information or misinformation about baseball. When he judged enough time had passed he went back through the crowd, waited his turn and relieved himself in the men's room. He washed the sweat off his hands and threaded his way to the front door fighting down the fear inside him: he waved drunkenly to his two conversational companions and lurched outside, all but colliding with a laughing couple on their way in.

He looked one way and then the other, a man drunk enough to have trouble remembering where he'd parked his car. Sweat slicked his palms and he rubbed them on the cloth inside his coat pocket. He started off in the wrong direction, brought himself up with anger and stumbled back toward the corner.

In the edge of his vision the two young men on the stoop sat up a bit. Their hats turned, indicating their interest in his progress.

Paul stopped at the corner and studied all four streets in turn with the great concentration of the inebriate: then he stepped carefully off the curb and weaved toward the far side, maintaining his balance with visible effort.

Inside the drunk's act he was afraid. *You don't have to try it. You don't have to die. Don't come after me.*

But the fear was on his tongue. It was familiar terror, an old acquaintance, a frightening thing compounded of their intentions and his own: he was afraid of them but afraid of himself as well, afraid of what he knew he would do. It was something he sensed but still did not understand.

He knew they wouldn't leave him alone. They'd had that bar staked out for hours waiting for a mark like him; they wouldn't get a better shot if they waited a week. A lone drunk lurching into a dark street trying to remember where he'd parked his car....

He breathed deeply and regularly to calm himself. Into shadow now and he stopped on the edge of the curb pretending anger because he couldn't find his car. He had his back to them but he knew they were there because their silhouettes obscured the splash of streetlight when they reached the corner.

He stooped and tried to fit his key into the door of a car but it was the wrong car and he swore a oath—loud enough to reach the two men's ears—and gave the offending car a petulant kick and went on, bending down to peer close at each parked car he passed.

When they came for him they came in a rush and one of them had the wine bottle upraised, ready to strike at the back of Paul's skull; the other had a folding knife opened to rip upward with the extended blade.

He heard them in plenty of time but the fear paralyzed him momentarily; he moved slower than he should have—he didn't know the gun yet, he should have allowed more time, but they were nearly on top of him when he crouched and turned, stretching his arm out.

It stopped them in their tracks. They had a good look at his undrunk eyes and the black revolver they knew what hit them.

The noise was intense, earsplitting; the gun crashed against the heel of his hand.

The man with the wine bottle bent double. Paul shifted his aim and shot the knife man in the chest.

He barely heard the bottle shatter on the pavement. He shot both men in the heads while they were falling because they had to be dead so that they couldn't identify him.

In a chilly sweat of terror he staggered away.

HE RACKED the Pontiac into its stall in the underground garage. The attendant was in uniform and armed with a revolver in a holster; Paul greeted him and took the elevator straight up to his floor, the seventeenth.

It was a high-rise, 501 Lake Shore Drive, an apartment tower at the T-end of Grand Avenue. Spalter had tried to steer him to a suburban real-estate agent but Paul had spent his life in apartments except for one brief attempt to live in a house and in the end he had found Number 501 in a classified ad in the real-estate section of the *Sunday Tribune* and he'd taken the apartment the same afternoon.

The steel door had the ordinary slip lock and a dead bolt above. He had to use two keys to lock himself in. Behind him closed-circuit TV eyes guarded the corridor. He shut the door and turned both locks before he switched on the lamps and put down his parcel on the coffee table.

He had taken it furnished on a sublet; he wasn't sure how long he'd stay. The furniture was functional and as characterless as that of a hotel room; the lease tenant was an English instructor at the University of Chicago who was spending a sabbatical in London and who evidently was indifferent to the style of his physical surroundings; the only feature that suggested anything about its previous occupant was the long wall of floor-to-ceiling bookcases, most of them empty now. There were a living room and a bedroom and the kitchenette alcove. The windows looked out on the Loop and that meant it was a less expensive flat than the ones across the hall which commanded views of Lake Michigan and the Navy Pier. Nevertheless this was the Gold Coast and the rent was high by any standards except those of New York.

He drew the blinds before he took out the two guns and put them on the coffee table; then he hung his topcoat in the hall closet and made himself a drink from the refrigerator before he sat down and opened the parcel, got out the cleaning kit and unloaded the Centennial and performed the routine that had become mindless habit in his New York apartment. In an obscure way it made him feel at home in this room for the first time. He broke the revolver's cylinder open to the side, threaded a cloth patch through the needle's eye at the tip of the ramrod, dipped it in solvent until it was soaking and then ran it through the open barrel of the revolver. It came out stained with black gunpowder residue and he had to soak several patches and run them through before one came out clean. He swabbed all five chambers of the cylinder and then ran an oil-soaked patch through the clean orifices to coat them and protect them from corrosion. He oiled the mechanism with the needle-point oilcan and put the kit back together, loaded the revolver and then mopped up the table's glass top.

He'd be safe carrying the guns on his person for a few days; after that they'd start looking for him and he'd have to find a place away from the apartment to hide them when he wasn't carrying. He had a place in mind for that.

He finished the drink, switched off the lights and opened the blinds; and sat on the couch looking out across the midnight lights of Chicago. He was favorably impressed by the city; but this was where he'd perform the duties of his mission of retribution.

Spalter had met him at O'Hare Airport Saturday morning. There'd been the desultory commonplaces of introductions and small talk: "I think, you're going to like it here." Spalter had checked him into the Continental Plaza and then, even though it was Saturday, had taken him by taxi down into the Loop to show him the downtown district and the office where Paul would work. It was Paul's first contact with the strident self-consciousness of Chicago and it had been several days before

he'd understood that Spalter was not unusual: neither a Chamber of Commerce crank nor conventionneering loudmouth. Chicago's boosterism was built-in standard equipment. When they realized you were from out of town they launched into their rehearsed litanies: this was the tallest building in the world; that was the biggest post office in the world; there was the busiest airport in the world. They were as insistent and oblivious as Texans.

Spalter was a clever administrator in his forties, not more than ten pounds heavier than he'd been at half that age when he'd spent two seasons as a halfback at North-western: big and bulky but not religious about keeping in shape. His good-natured personality probably concealed a certain amount of cold-blooded pragmatism because it took more than sheer charm to achieve an executive vice-presidency with an accounting firm the size of Childress Associates. There wasn't much doubt he had stabbed a few backs.

Saturday morning Spalter had taken him down State Street past the shops and department stores through gaudy decorations and thronging pre-Christmas shoppers. The narrow monolithic canyons of the Loop reminded Paul of the Wall Street financial district: nearly every building seemed to be a bank. Traffic crawled under the noisy El tracks.

The office was in a building at 313 Monroe near Wacker in the heart of the Loop. The building might have been designed in the 1920s by an enthusiast who had understood more history than architecture: its façade was a tribute to at least three classic styles. The ninth-floor offices were deserted for the weekend but Spalter had shown him dutifully from the boardroom and the chairman's corner suite through computer rooms and mailroom and Spalter's own sanctum and finally a well-appointed office which already had Paul's name in gilt on the door.

"You'll like it, Paul. We're go-getters here—it's our inferiority complex. We're competing with the New York hotshots and we know we've got to be ahead of them just to stay even. Keeps us on our toes, let me tell you."

Spalter had signed them out under the eye of the lobby guard and walked Paul down Monroe to the University Club. It reminded Paul of the Harvard Club in New York: primly old-fashioned with forceful humorless masculinity.

Spalter chose a pair of armchairs and ordered drinks. "We were doing some audit work for a plastics plant on the South Side. They had an unannounced sit-down strike and the manager out there didn't know what the hell to do—he had a rush order to bring in on a penalty contract. He and Childress were having lunch in the club here and the plant manager was moaning about the strike. Our esteemed chairman of the board proved what executive genius is all about, that day."

"How?"

"Childress told the manager what to do. The manager walked into the factory and told the strikers as long as they were on a sit-in they might as well make themselves comfortable. He brought bourbon and beer by the case. When the strikers were pretty well stewed he sent in a busload of professional ladies to entertain them. They were having the time of their lives in there, and then the manager brought the men's wives in to see what was going on. Well the strike was called off in less than an hour."

Paul joined his laughter and Spalter sat back and covered his evident hesitation by turning his drink to catch the light, examining it. Paul said, "I'm looking forward to it—working for a firm with a sense of humor."

"There's enough laughs, most of the time. Childress is a born practical joker though—you want to watch out for a while until you catch onto his style. It's nothing crude—he won't put exploding cigars in your desk humidifier, nothing like that. He saves the nasty pranks for people on his hate list. The

manager of our building gave us some trouble a couple of years ago and Childress got beautiful revenge. You know all those bulk-rate catalogues and magazine subscription blurbs, the stuff you're overwhelmed with when you get on mailing lists? Well Childress filled out dozens of the damn things in the name of the building manager. The poor guy was buried in' magazines and mail-order junk he hadn't ordered. I think he almost went to court on two or three of them. Took him months to get sorted out—he was a complete wreck.”

Paul had met John V. Childress only once, when the chairman was visiting New York. Ives, the senior partner of Paul's firm of CPA's in New York, had been very understanding about Paul's need to get away. Ives had introduced Paul to John Childress and used his influence to obtain the Chicago position for Paul. In his brusque way Ives was the kindest of men; Paul was immodest enough to know he'd been valuable to the firm and Ives hadn't wanted to lose him. But Paul had been insistent. Esther's death had overwhelmed him, the reminders in New York were too much for him: he had to make a fresh start in new surroundings. When Carol had died it had been the final straw.

Spalter sipped his scotch. “It's not always fun and games working for Childress. He works our asses off.”

“That's the way I like it.”

“I've heard that about you. I think you're going to fit in just fine, Paul—and what's more important to you, I think we're going to fit in just fine with you.”

Spalter was a bit of a bullshit artist but Paul rather liked him. He made a gesture with his drink.

“Christmas coming up fast,” Spalter said. “We won't really be getting back into gear until after the first of the year. Childress and I both think it might be a good idea if you spent your first couple of weeks just relaxing, getting to know Chicago a bit before you plunge into the office routine. After the holidays there'll be a pile-up of income-tax work and you may not have too much time for familiarization. Anyhow, take the holidays off, find yourself a house, get settled in, get to know our town a bit. There'll probably be several Christmas and New Year's parties—I'll keep you posted. You can report in to work on Monday the sixth. How's that sound?”

It gave him more than two weeks; he agreed to it with suitable gratitude.

Spalter sat forward, elbows on knees. “Stop me if I'm out of line. But naturally we've heard a little about why you decided to move here. Do you mind talking about it?”

“Not any more. But why go into it?”

“The place is full of rumors. I think you can understand that. It'd be a good idea if we could put a lid on the gossip before people start looking at you as if you've got two heads.”

“What gossip?”

“For instance they're saying you went to pieces.”

Paul managed to smile.

“You don't look to me like a man who's gone to pieces.”

“It's a dreary story. All too commonplace.”

“Your wife was mugged, I gather.”

“My wife and my daughter. They were attacked in our apartment. My wife died in the hospital. My daughter died two months later.”

“As a result of the attack?”

“Indirectly.” He didn't elaborate. Carol had been institutionalized: catatonic withdrawal. In her mind she had fled from recollections too horrible to face. She'd become a vegetable. He'd watched her retreat: the steady terrible escape from reality until she'd collapsed into the final trance, unable to talk or see or hear or feed herself. Death had been, perhaps, an accident: she had choked on her own tongue.

and had been dead nearly half an hour before the nurse discovered it.

“Did they apprehend the muggers?”

“No.”

“Christ.”

Paul drained his glass and set it down gently. “Esther and Carol didn’t have any money with them, you see. Three or four dollars, that was all. The muggers got mad at them because they didn’t have any money.”

“Jesus.”

Paul met his eyes. “They gave them terrible beatings.”

Spalter looked away. “I’m—”

“No. Maybe I’m the one who should apologize. I told it to you that way for a reason.”

“To prove that you can face it—that you haven’t gone around the bend.”

“That’s right. There are things you have no control over. To me it’s as if they were both killed by an earthquake or an unexpected cancer. It’s in the past. I’ve got my grief but we’ve all got sorrows we have to live with. Either we carry on or we throw in the towel. I’m not the suicide type. Do you go to those movies?”

“Now and then,” Spalter said indifferently.

“I’m a Western nut. The rituals are relaxing, I find. In every other Western there’s a line—‘You have to play the cards you’re dealt.’”

“And that’s what you’re doing.”

“There’s really not much choice,” Paul lied.

Spalter brooded into his empty glass. The waiter brought fresh drinks and Spalter signed the check. “My daughter’s boy friend lives on Howard Street. I guess you wouldn’t know the area. Anyway a few months ago the city in its wisdom put up no-parking signs there, and Chet had to find overnight parking on the side streets after that. Within a month his car had been stripped twice. Recently the city council passed an ordinance to repeal the no-parking restrictions out there, but what the hell kind of solution to a problem is that? I suppose our troubles won’t come as any surprise to *you* but I’d be kidding if I said we didn’t have a hell of a crime problem in Chicago. A thousand murders—most of them never solved. It’s no promised land.”

Paul didn’t want to be drawn into speculations about the Crime Problem. The best way to avoid being betrayed by a slip of the tongue was to say nothing at all.

Spalter talked on. He darted from topic to topic and sometimes there were no discernible connectives. He wasn’t a stream-of-consciousness talker; he was being dutifully—and good-naturedly—helpful, telling Paul things he thought a newcomer ought to know. Paul was grateful when the subject moved away from crime.

He tried to put some show of interest on his face; he was finding it hard to keep his attention on Spalter’s pointers about the firm’s internal politics. There was useful data in Spalter’s anecdotes about office feuds and jealousies, his throwaway character sketches, his quick run-down on the company for which Childress Associates regularly did audits. It would be important for Paul to familiarize himself with these oddments. He intended to do good work at Childress: he’d always taken pride in his abilities but now there was something else—he couldn’t risk drawing attention to himself by displaying any sudden deterioration in the professional capabilities for which he was known. It would require more effort than before because the job was no longer the center of his life; now it was merely a source of income and a camouflage for the appeasement of his private demons.

After lunch they had left the club and Spalter, burly in his topcoat, had ridden with Paul as far as

the hotel. Paul had declined Spalter's dinner invitation, pleading tiredness after his flight. When Spalter was gone he had crossed the street and prowled the arcade of the John Hancock complex until he found a magazine shop where he bought Chicago maps and guidebooks and all three local newspapers and a *New York Times* which had a page 40 column about the police department's continuing unsuccessful search for the vigilante who had used the same revolver, according to ballistics reports, to kill seventeen people in the streets of New York over a five-week span. Of those seventeen victims of his retributive vengeance, fourteen had criminal records and two others had been found dead with stolen property on or near their bodies. It was possible he had saved a score of innocent lives.

In his hotel room he had found a printed card from the management:

We urge your use of the Safety Deposit Vaults available at no charge at the Front Office. Please DO NOT leave furs, jewelry, cameras, money or ANY VALUABLES in your room. Illinois State law relieve the hotel from liability for loss, excepting when valuables have been properly placed in safety deposit vault....Please use the DOUBLE LOCKS on your guest room door. We wish you a most enjoyable stay.

That night he'd slept with his wallet inside his pillowcase.

¶ CHICAGO, DEC. 17TH—The bodies of two men, shot to death, were found early this morning on the sidewalk in the 2000 block on North Mohawk.

Discovery of the homicide victims was reported to the police by Philip Frank, 43, a passing motorist.

A police spokesman identified the dead men as Edward A. Smith, 23, of 1901 Washtenaw, and Leroy Thompson, 22, address uncertain. According to the police, both men had criminal records for assault and robbery; Thompson was serving a suspended two-year sentence at the time of his death.

The shattered remains of an empty wine bottle were found near the bodies. A police spokesman said one of the dead men, Smith, was found with a knife lying near his hand.

Both victims were shot twice. Police report that ballistics investigation suggests the same .38 revolver was used to fire all four bullets. "But we're not absolutely certain," the police spokesman cautioned. "The bullets recovered from the bodies are badly misshapen and fragmented. They're almost certainly hollow-point bullets, and we're going to need further laboratory examination before we can be positive they all came from the same weapon."

No motive has been put forth for the homicides. District detectives are investigating.

The two homicides raise this year's number of gunshot deaths within Chicago's city limits to 856.

AT THE BAR, men ruminated secretively over their beer, looking up at newcomers and looking away again. Toward the back a group of hearty men shouted across one another. The room had dark wood, poor light and a lingering aura of tobacco smoke and grain whiskey. Specks of dust twirled under the lights.

Paul found a space at the bar. "I'll have a beer."

The bartender named half a dozen brands; Paul picked one. While he waited for it he studied the crowd and decided the noisy group at the back contained his men.

The bar was a block from the Tribune Tower and equidistant from the *Daily News* and *Sun-Times* pressrooms. Paul had chosen it because it was likely to be the informal headquarters of the city's news reporters and he suspected it might be the best source of information about the unfamiliar city. He needed to know about Chicago: he needed to know how the city worked, where its stresses were, how the police operated.

He carried his beer toward the back and hovered at the edge of the loud group. There were nine or ten men and women roughed up by alcohol and cigarettes and the cynicisms of insiders' experience. It was only half past six but they'd been at their drinks long enough to be doing more talking than listening; insistent assertions roared cacophonously back and forth. They were talking about the mayor and the machine but he couldn't sort out much at all in the babble.

At the edge of it two men observed without participating and Paul maneuvered himself closer to them. One stood against the bar, wincing at the racket; the other was a moon-faced bald man with a drink in his hand. "Don't flatter yourself, Mike. You didn't invent the hangover."

"The hell. I'm going to take out a patent on this one." Mike waved angrily at the oblivious bartender.

The bald man said, "When he comes I advise you to make it a double. This joint serves thimble-size shots."

Paul was between Mike and the bartender; he turned and managed to attract the bartender's eye. The bartender came along the slot: "Yes sir?"

Paul gestured to the man behind him. "This gentleman wants a drink."

Mike turned, reached an arm past Paul's shoulder and slapped his palm on the bar. "Double Dewar's straight up."

The bald man said, "Wish I could afford that."

"Try not to get fired so often then." Mike smiled through bad teeth at Paul. "My friend, you've just saved a life. Name's Ludlow, there, buddy. Mike Ludlow."

"Fred Mills," Paul lied. "Nice to meet you."

"A new face," said the bald man. "Christ you must have wandered into this crazy farm by mistake. Mr. Mills. My name's Dan O'Hara. Don't believe a word this man tells you—he's a no-good drunk."

Ludlow reached for his drink when the bartender set it before him: he raised it carefully to his lips. "Not a drunk, O'Hara. An alcoholic. You've got no subtlety, you stupid mick, you don't understand vital distinctions."

"He's a drunk," O'Hara confided. "Don't listen to him."

Ludlow swallowed most of the drink and closed his eyes. "Listen. Shoot their mouths off all night long until the beer runs out and nobody listens to a word of it." Paul had to lean forward to catch his

words; the crowd's racket was intense.

The bartender put a bill on the bar in front of Ludlow and Paul picked it up, doing it quietly but knowing O'Hara saw it. Paul turned it face down and put a five-dollar bill on it and waited for the change.

O'Hara had a mild brogue. "All right, Mr. Mills, what can we do for you?" He said it amiably but he'd made the connection immediately.

"I'm from New York, my company transferred me out here. I don't know a damn thing about Chicago."

"And you've come to the fountainhead. Smart lad."

Ludlow drained his glass and put it down. "I'll buy the next round. Thanks for the drink, sport. What line are you in?"

"Security systems." Paul had it pat on his tongue. "Burglar alarms for the home, electronic security—everything in the gadget line. We're a new company, just breaking into the Midwest market."

"And you want to get to know your new turf." O'Hara put his beer glass down beside Ludlow's. "I'll tell you what, Mike, why don't we take Mr. Mills around the corner where we can hear ourselves think. Can't give the man serious advice in this heathen bedlam."

Paul gathered his change and left a tip on the bar. Ludlow gave him a friendly touch on the shoulder and steered him toward the door in O'Hara's broad wake.

A few snowflakes undulated into Rush Street but it was nothing that would settle; the pavements were hardly moist. O'Hara turned up the sheepskin collar of his bulky cloth coat. "Another bleeding slush Christmas, I predict."

"Always bitching about the rain." Ludlow had a harsh laugh. "This bastard was *born* in a country where it rains twenty-four hours a day."

They turned a corner and went under the El tracks into a sandwich parlor with chrome-and-formica booths; the lighting was bright but there was a bar along the near wall and the place was nearly empty. Paul sat on a stool and found himself bracketed between O'Hara and Ludlow. O'Hara had ink on his fingernails: he held up a hand and beckoned the barmaid. "Dewar's straight up, darlin', and a Miller for my cheap friend. What's for you, Mr. Mills?"

"Beer's fine."

Ludlow put his money on the bar. "Well now, where do we start?"

O'Hara coughed. "Let's find out what it is our friend wants to know."

"We know what he wants to know. He wants to know what kind of place Chicago is."

"I'll answer that in a sentence. When derelicts go slumming, they go to Chicago."

Ludlow said, "O'Hara don't know what the hell he's talking about. He writes think-pieces, he's a political reporter. Every six months they fire him because somebody from the Cook County machine leans on his editor. Me, I stay on the news beat, I've been a crime reporter eight years in this town. I'm the one you want to pump. Forget this ignorant mick."

"Watch it now, Mike."

"I'll give you some facts," Ludlow said, more to O'Hara than to Paul. "Fact, O'Hara. There's a robbery in this town every three minutes around the clock. Fact, we had eight hundred homicides last year and we're way above that record this year. Crime's up fifteen percent overall. Fact, O'Hara—less than one per cent of Chicago's crimes are solved, in the sense that some joker gets tried and convicted and sent to the slammer."

O'Hara drank and spoke in a voice made breathless by the beer. "Statistics."

"Here's a statistic, Mr. Mills. An infant boy born in Chicago today has a better chance of being

murdered than an American soldier in World War Two had to get killed in combat. If the crime rate keeps increasing the way it's going now, one Chicagoan in every fifteen will be a homicide victim. Dead, dead."

"Crime rate." O'Hara made a sound: it might have been a sneeze. "Listen to this fool." He turned and poked Paul's sleeve. "I'll give you real facts. We're living in an occupied war zone. The city is chopping and slashing itself to ruin. It's what the ecologists call a behavioral sink. An intolerable overcrowding that leads to the inevitable collective massacre." He pronounced the polysyllables with exaggerated precision.

"Yeah," Ludlow said obscurely. "Yeah, yeah."

"Chicago," O'Hara said in a mock-wistful voice. "It's watching the lake shore and waiting for some scaly grade-B monster to loom out of the sludge and step on the whole thing—the buildings and the people and the rats that bite the people. And in the meantime the cops go right on vaggin' prostitutes and shaking down storekeepers while a sniper picks off four drivers on the John F. Kennedy Expressway."

"Twenty-six homicides last weekend," Ludlow said. There was no perceptible emotion in his voice. "Sixty hours, twenty-six murders."

Paul said, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"It shouldn't be like that," Paul said. "People shouldn't have to be afraid."

Ludlow only laughed off-key.

O'Hara said, "Listen, I talked to a guy in Cicero—he's eighty years old and he's grateful because it was only the third time his apartment got knocked over."

"Why does everybody put up with it?"

"We're all sheep," O'Hara said. "Sure. Last weekend there was a mugger working the Christmas shoppers down in the Loop. Wearing drag, but it was a guy. Transvestite. He got pissed because a dame refused to hand over her handbag. The guy in drag shot the woman to death in broad daylight right in front of the bus terminal on Randolph."

"Sweet Jesus." Paul had the glass in his hand; suddenly it felt cold.

Ludlow sang sotto voce: "Chicago, Chicago, it's my kind of town," confusing two songs, possibly deliberately.

Paul said, "The mugger in women's clothes—was he caught?"

"That one they caught," O'Hara said: "Of course for every one they nail, there's a hundred that don't."

"You'll do a fantastic business in this town," Ludlow told Paul. "Not that it'll do any good."

"Why?"

"The police won't answer the alarms half the time."

"Apathy," O'Hara said. "Two guys got hit last night over on Mohawk .38 revolver, four shots fired right on a residential street. Nobody phoned in a report. Everybody who lives on that block must have heard the shots. But it had to wait for some guy driving by to spot the corpses and report it to the cops and they took their time getting there."

"You try to walk in this town, you hear footsteps behind you it's like the sound of grenades. A walk in Chicago after dark is a combat mission."

"It's politics, bloody politics."

"Listen to him. Everything's politics to the mick."

"There was a time when the Cook County machine was good for something. You got ripped off, the

clubhouse would provide a meal and even a job for you, and a lawyer for the guy who ripped you off. It was all part of the community in those days. Now it's a political battlefield. The big shots have been drawn back, there's just no contact at all between the politicians and the communities. The machine answers criticism by closing ranks—there are no lines of communication any more. The cops are on the take or they're not on the take, but either way there's no old-fashioned dedication there any more. It's just a job to those guys—you put as little as you can into it, you take as much as you can out of it. If they start busting heads they're accused of police brutality and if they don't bust heads they're accused of corruption—you can't blame them. The judicial system's fucked up beyond belief because nobody knows how to treat crime any more. You kill somebody on the street, you cop a plea, the judge lets you off with jail time served and a year's probation. The rewards for crime keep increasing while the cost of committing crime keeps decreasing. The chances are you won't get caught, and if you get caught the chances are you won't get tried, and if you get tried the chances are you won't get convicted, and if you get convicted the chances are you won't go to prison. The crooks have got the odds of a thousand to one in their favor. The rest of us are torn between retribution and compassion—we don't know what we ought to do, so we don't do anything at all.”

“The people know zip about crime,” Ludlow said.

O'Hara said, “Let's have another drink. Mr. Mills is buying.”

BEFORE HE LEFT THEM the two journalists had consumed prodigiously and their bickering had lost its amicability: they were threatening each other like blowhards in a Western saloon. The bartender intervened but it only persuaded O'Hara and Ludlow to take the quarrel outside into the night where they started feinting like boxers in the drifting snow.

Paul faded into the darkness. He had never understood men who fought for fun.

He had nursed two beers for hours and come away with valuable items of information and innuendo. He knew something of the organization and disposition of the police—their districts and patterns of patrol, their levels of diligence and indifference. He had gained a rudimentary idea of the organization of the force's homicide detectives and captains—it was somewhat different from the vertical structure of the New York department—and he'd learned something about the Chicago Crime Commission. He'd been told demographic and commercial facts that didn't appear on his street map—Old Town, New Town, the Lithuanian and Polish and Italian and Chinese neighborhoods, the hardcore centers of the four police districts in which nearly half of Chicago's violent crimes were reported. He'd learned that police surveillance was highest and most efficient in the First Ward—because it was the home ward of the city's venerable political machine and because it included the showcase Loop—and that it was thinnest in the west and southwest districts.

He'd learned a great many details, some of which might prove inaccurate; nevertheless it had been worthwhile and the two reporters had played nicely into his hands. They'd had to: ask a man to talk about a topic on which he considers himself an expert and he will happily oblige.

He found his way back along Rush Street to the open lot where his car was parked. He ransomed it, declined a receipt and drove south toward the inferior regions of the city.

He was hunting again. At first in New York he'd tried to rationalize it. He'd walk down Riverside Park late at night with his hand on the gun in his coat pocket, and he'd convince himself he was only doing what any peace-loving citizen had a right to do—walk unafraid in a public park. Any predator who might attack him was asking for whatever happened: *It's not my doing, he can leave me alone if he wants to*. But he couldn't delude himself forever. He wasn't strolling in those parks at two o'clock in the morning for exercise or enjoyment. He was prowling for a kill and any other description of himself had to be rationalization. The gun in his pocket wasn't there for self-protection. He wasn't defending himself, he was attacking: setting a trap, using himself as the bait and closing the trap when the predator entered it.

He'd asked himself why. He took no pleasure from watching a man die. There was no perverted thrill in it. Inevitably his reaction afterward was painful nausea. He did not feel particularly cleansed or particularly triumphant. Relief, sometimes, that he had come through again without injury; but that wasn't a challenge that thrilled him, it wasn't anything he had to prove to himself—it wasn't macho. He'd spent months thinking of nothing else but there were some things you could analyze to death without ever being able to explain them. It was—what? A sense of obligation? Not a compulsion, not a perverse addiction, no; it wasn't something he felt compelled to do. It was simply something that *ought* to be done. A job, a duty uncertainly defined; he couldn't get closer than that.

When he was deep inside the urban ferment of the South Side ghetto he chose a boulevard lined with shabby stores and drove slowly through the sparse traffic until he saw an open pawn shop. He cruised past it, made the next right turn and had no difficulty finding a place to park; it was not

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