

EXPIRATION DATE

DUANE SWIERCZYNSKI



Praise for *Expiration Date*

“*Expiration Date* is a skillful, fast-paced, rock ’em, jolt ’em, spook ’em, leave-em-laughin’ story with believable characters and a pedal-to-the-floor narrative drive. Top-of-the-line entertainment.”

—Tom Piccirilli, author of *Shadow Season*

Praise for *Severance Package*

“A kinetic story, which never stops moving...turbocharged entertainment.”

—Marilyn Stasio, *The New York Times*

“Swierczynski writes a brand of thriller whose pacing forces us to reexamine our casual use of the word *breakneck*... This is essentially one long action scene that begs for the next Tarantino to direct. But if that sounds like faint praise, it isn’t: there are both enough cliché killers and comedy to make you raise two thumbs up. If you want your thrillers to be, well, thrilling, pop a big bowl of corn—you won’t leave your seat until the end.”

—Booklist

“The best word to describe Swierczynski’s latest thriller is *frenetic*, and even that is likely an understatement.”

—Library Journal

“This action fest moves swiftly to its darkly satisfying conclusion.”

—Publishers Weekly

“A guilty pleasure of unparalleled magnitude, with pedal-to-the-metal pacing, characters who appear to be meek cubicle dwellers à la *Office Space* but are really cold-blooded black-ops killers, and enough gut-churning violence to make a Quentin Tarantino movie look like a Disney musical replete with singing candlesticks and teapots. The dark, twisted energy in this novel is palpable.”

—Chicago Tribune

“Wildly violent and way funny, the book’s a summer blockbuster waiting to be filmed. Grade: A-.”

—Philadelphia magazine

“Duane Swierczynski speeds through his action-filled plot, replete with bloodshed, mayhem, and twists. His prose draws the reader in, and his short chapters and revved-up action sequences make *Severance Package* a one-sitting read.... This novel is as powerful as an unexpected punch in the stomach.”

—The Omaha World-Herald (Nebraska)

Praise for *The Blonde*

“Compulsively readable...rockets forward with inventive ferocity. [The] plot uncoils in a rapid-fire series of time-coded moments that generate a relentless tension. Brilliantly paced insanity.”
—*Houston Chronicle*

“Two parts adrenaline rush, one part medical thriller, this twisted story starts with a bang and rarely slows down. Full of offbeat characters, excruciatingly reckless twists, and sardonic humor, this fun ride shows great promise for a rising author.”
—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“This is delicious postmodern hard-boiled punk rock storytelling. Swierczynski’s hit man character is as funny and fresh as he is fierce and quick. *The Blonde* is masterfully paced, wonderfully rendered, and devastatingly entertaining.”

—Greg Rucka, Eisner Award-winning author of *Queen & Country* and 2006 Barry Award-nominated thriller *Private War*

“Duane Swierczynski’s new novel, *The Blonde*, is as lean as a starving model, mean as a snake, and fast as a jet. It’s also one hell of a fine read. This guy has got to be the hottest new thing in crime fiction, and *The Blonde* is one of the best crime reads I’ve had in some time.”

—Joe R. Lansdale, Edgar-winning author of *Sunset and Sawdust*

“Page-turning tension...a story so bizarre that it just might be true.”

—*Kirkus Review*

“A hilarious nail-biter, a tour-de-force by a young writer who has already carved out this unique take on the crime genre, so it’s futile to compare it to anything else.... It is sui generis. It is perfect.”

—Laura Lippman, bestselling author of *What the Dead Know*

“Another fast, funny, and action-packed outing from a writer who, fortunately for us, doesn’t seem to know how to slow down.”

—*Booklist*

“Quite a ride. The prose is hard-boiled enough to crack walnuts and the action more precipitous than bobsled run.”

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Mr. Swierczynski knows how to streamline a story, keep the pace breakneck, sucking all the oxygen out of the room while he tells you this very gritty and nervy story about a pickup gone wrong. Delicious dialogue, funny realizations, and one hell of a ride.”

—Frank Bascombe, *Ain’t It Cool News*

Praise for *The Wheelman*

“If you are partial to fast-paced thrillers that present this world as an unforgiving, blood-soaked wasteland, you should love Duane Swierczynski’s first novel. Swierczynski’s novel, like those of [Elmore] Leonard, offers an undertow of humor beneath the churning sea of man’s inhumanity.”

“Swierczynski has an uncommon gift for the banal lunacy of criminal dialogue, a delightfully devious eye for character, and a surprisingly well-developed narrative for a beginner.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Adrenaline-charged...fast-moving and funny, *The Wheelman* is Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride in an R-rated amusement park.”

—*Booklist*

“I canceled a night out and stayed up all night reading. That’s how much I loved this book...at every turn, I was blindsided. Hilarious and bloody violent.”

—Ken Bruen, author of the Shamus Award–winning *The Guard*

“A great heist story in the rich tradition of Richard Stark’s Parker novels and Stanley Kubrick’s *The Killing*...keeps readers holding their breath to see what’s going to happen next. It is clearly the work of a maturing writer who is possessed of a keen style and abundant talent.”


—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Dark stuff...hilariously funny at the same time. Swierczynski has come up with his own twisted and thoroughly enjoyable genre. Bring on some more, sir.”

—*Rocky Mountain News*

“Oh, what style!”

—*Kirkus Review*



EXPIRATION DATE

DUANE SWIERCZYNSKI



MINOTAUR BOOKS NEW YORK

FOR

LOUIS WOJCIECHOWSKI

1926–2009

WELL—

~~SO IT GOES:~~

TIME HITS THE HARDEST BLOWS.

—JOSEPH MONCURE MARC

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See that body sprawled on the hardwood floor, marinating in a pool of his own blood?

That's me.

Five minutes ago I was shot in the back. Three times, right between the shoulder blades. The guy who runs the late-night beer bodega downstairs, Willie Shahid, heard the shots—*bang bang bang*—then saw somebody with a revolver go shuffling down Frankford Avenue. After a few minutes, he walked upstairs to check it out.

Now Willie's outside the apartment door. He knocks, and then waits a second. Something's not right. He sniffs the air; the acrid scent of chalk and burnt paper fills his nostrils. *Gunpowder*. It's not an unfamiliar scent to Willie Shahid. Not in this neighborhood.

Watch Willie Shahid take out his cell and dial 911, giving the proper address and even the floor. Guy's a real pro.

If you hang around a little longer, you'll see the EMTs arrive, and then the Philly PD, 15th District. They'll move me to a stretcher and carry me out the front door of the building, under the rumbling El train and past a bunch of dudes in oversized white T-shirts and deadpan expressions.

Soon the surgeons at nearby Frankford Hospital will dig the slugs out of my back, place them in a kidney-shaped steel tray. From there, they'll transfer them to a plastic evidence bag and send it down to the Philadelphia Police Department's forensics lab at Eighth and Race. Standard procedure—bullets from GSWs always go right to the lab for ballistic analysis.

A few days later confusion will sweep over the forensics guys' faces. Identifying the type of bullet will be no problem: .38 caliber.

No, something else will trouble them.

After analyzing the slugs and gunpowder, the CSI guys will determine that the bullets are at least forty years old. They'll also discover that this specific type stopped being manufactured back in 1967.

Now, old bullets can still work. But they'll have to be asking themselves: Why use forty-year-old ammunition to snuff somebody?

Some people have the idea that when you die your life flashes before your eyes, like a movie on fast-forward.

Not quite.

Time's arrow only appears to fly straight when you're alive. Dead is something else. Once you cross that invisible line, you see things how they really are. You see that every moment seems to happen all at once.

Which makes telling this story—or the most important parts of it, anyway—difficult. Usually, you start at the beginning. Or the middle, so the listener doesn't get bored.

Problem is, I'm very hazy on the beginning and the middle, as I came in during the end. I can speculate, but it'd be nothing more than a wild guess.

I guess I should start with the day I moved into the apartment and went back in time.

I



Thomas Jefferson Goes to a Porno

I was sitting on my front stoop, drinking a Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. At eleven bucks a six-pack, Sierra's a splurge beer, so I tried to savor every sip. I'd probably be drinking pounder cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon from now on.

After a while Meghan came out and I handed her the last one. She thanked me by bumping shoulders. We sat for a while and drank our beers in the warm downtown sun. It would have been a perfect day if I wasn't moving out.

Meghan leaned back on her elbows, blond hair hanging down across her forehead.

"You sure I can't give you a ride?"

I swallowed, enjoying the bitter taste of hops in my mouth, the bright sun on my face. Then I looked at her.

"Frankford's kind of a bad neighborhood."

"No neighborhoods are bad, Mickey. They're just misunderstood."

"No, seriously. It's bad. There was a story in yesterday's *Daily News*. Some high school kid there was murdered by three of his friends. And I don't mean over a dumb fight over sneakers or drugs. I mean, they planned his execution, killed him, then worked hard to hide the evidence."

"They didn't work too hard if the *Daily News* found out about it."

Meghan and I had been friends since the year before, when I moved to Sixteenth and Spruce, just a few blocks away from swank Rittenhouse Square. If you've ever been to Philadelphia, you know the square I'm talking about—high-end restaurants, high-rise condos. I couldn't afford this neighborhood even when I was gainfully employed.

But two weeks ago my alt-weekly newspaper, the *Philadelphia City Press*, decided they could get by with only one staff writer. They wished me all the best. Since no other papers were crying out for my services, here or elsewhere, I joined the ranks of the newly unemployed. Just like hundreds of thousands of other people.

So now my meager possessions were almost packed and I was waiting for a ride from my mom so she could take me to my grandfather's cramped—yet rent-free—efficiency in Frankford, which was a long, long way from Rittenhouse Square.

Normally I refused to accept any help or advice from my mom. The less she knew about my life the less I owed her, the better. But my back was up against the wall now. I couldn't afford another week in this apartment, let alone another month. I had no money for a deposit on another apartment.

I was moving back to Frankford.

Slumming is one thing when you're twenty-two and just out of college and backed up by a deep pile parental checking account. But moving to a bad neighborhood when you're thirty-seven and have exhausted all other options is something else entirely. It's a heavy thing with a rope, dragging you down to a lower social depth with no easy way back to the surface.

Worst of all, you can still see them up there—the friends you graduated with fifteen years ago—laughing and splashing around, having a good time.

The last thing I wanted was Meghan to escort me to the bottom of the ocean, give me an awkward hug, then swim back up to the party. She'd offered to drive me at least a half-dozen times over the past two weeks, and I repeatedly had told her no, my mom insisted on taking me.

Which was a total friggin' lie.

"You don't want to go to Frankford," I said. "It's one of the busiest drug corridors in the city. It

even used to have its own serial killer.”

“Now you’re just making stuff up.”

“Completely serious. Happened when I was in high school—in the late 1980s. The guy was called the Frankford Slasher, and he killed a bunch of prostitutes. I wrote a piece about it for the *Press*.”

“That was Jack the Ripper.”

“It was also the Frankford Slasher.”

“Still think you’re making it up.”

I pushed myself up by pressing my palms on the warm brownstone.

“I’d better finish packing. A couple of teenagers could be plotting my death as we speak, and I don’t want to disappoint them.”

“Or the Frankford Slasher.”

“Fortunately, I’m not a prostitute.”

“Not yet.”

“Nice.”

There was an awkward moment of silence. Then Meghan looked at me.

“Call your mom, Mickey. Tell her I’m driving you.”

Frankford wasn’t always a bad neighborhood. A couple hundred years ago it was a nice quiet village where the framers of the Constitution would spend their summers to escape the stifling heat of the city. I could show you the place—Womrath Park—where Thomas Jefferson allegedly kicked back and read the Declaration of Independence for the first time in public.

But take Thomas Jefferson to Womrath Park now. Introduce him to the new owners of the park—the hard young men selling little white chunks of smokeable *snuff*. Walk him into the triple-X theater across the street, where he’d be treated to projected images of people engaged in a very different sort of *congress*.

You could almost imagine him marching back down to Independence Hall and saying: *Look, fellas, I think we oughta think this whole “freedom” thing through a bit more.*

A century after Jefferson, Frankford the Quiet Country Village morphed into Frankford the Bustling Industrial Neighborhood. It was a popular way station on the road (King’s Highway) from Philadelphia to New York City. The streets were crowded with factories and mills, along with modes but-sturdy rowhomes for the workers who labored in them. There were cotton mills, bleacheries, wool mills, iron works and calico print works. There was a bustling arsenal and gunpowder mill. The industry thrived for a while, then sputtered, then died. Just like it did in the rest of the country.

But they say the neighborhood was truly doomed in 1922, the year the city ran an elevated train down its main artery—Frankford Avenue—shrouding the shops below in darkness and pigeon crap. White flight to the suburbs began in the 1950s. Then, in the 1960s, drugs found Frankford, and invited all of its friends to stay.

And I’d told Meghan the truth: a serial killer really did prowl the dark avenue under the El, late at night, looking for drunks and prostitutes in the 1980s around dive bars like Brady’s at Bridge and Pratt. The Slasher was never caught.

A Philly band called American Dream had a minor pop hit back in the early 1970s called “Frankford El.” The chorus explained that you can’t get to Heaven on the Frankford El. Why? *Because the Frankford El goes straight to...Frankford.*

Grandpop’s block looked like a junkie’s smile. Starting from the extreme left, you had the dirty

concrete steps leading up to the Margaret Street station of the El. Right next door, an abandoned building. Then, a weeded lot. A three-story building. Weeded lot. Grandpop's building, the ground floor occupied by one of those beer/rolling paper/pork rind bodegas that upset City Council so much. Weeded lot. Weeded lot.

Out of an original eight buildings on this strip of Frankford Avenue, only three remained.

My new place was up on the third floor, where it appeared I'd have an excellent view of the El tracks.

Meghan gazed up at the dirty underbelly of the El through her windshield. Pigeons nested around up there, covering every possible square inch with their chunky white shit.

"It's not so bad."

"You're right. If you squint, it's eerily reminiscent of Rittenhouse Square."

"This is probably the next great undiscovered neighborhood. Look what they did to Fishtown and Northern Liberties."

"Yeah. They could level the area with a bunker buster and start all over."

She scanned the block. Across the street was a rusty metal kiosk that, if I remember correctly, used to be a newsstand. Now it appeared to be a community urinal.

"Think it's okay to park here?"

Meghan was born and raised on Philadelphia's so-called Main Line. You remember the movie—Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, all that? That's the Main Line. I remembered watching the movie on TV as a kid and wondering why they called it *The Philadelphia Story*, because they certainly couldn't have filmed it in Philadelphia.

The Philly I knew was *Rocky*, *Twelve Monkeys*. Hardcore gritty tales set in unforgiving concrete canyons. Meghan claimed to love the rough-and-tumble Philadelphia from *Rocky* and *Twelve Monkeys*. I had to gently remind her that the latter was a postapocalyptic film.

Still, I couldn't blame her.

She didn't grow up here.

When I left Frankford after college I swore I'd never return. You get punched in the face often enough, chased down the block and through your own front door often enough...well, it kind of puts you off a neighborhood.

As a kid, I mostly stayed in my back bedroom and read whatever I could get my hands on. And later, I wrote stories. Looking back on it now, it seems I was plotting my escape all along, because it was a writing career that got me out of Frankford.

And now, the lack of a writing career was bringing me back.

My mom had come up with the idea of me crashing here until I found another job. It wasn't like Grandpop Henry would know the difference. The downstairs bodega owner had found him a few hours after he'd suffered some kind of seizure and fell into a coma—the same day I lost my job at the *City Press*, in fact. Not exactly a banner day for the family.

My mom told me that Grandpop Henry could breathe on his own. But now he was like a TV without cable: the power was on, only he couldn't receive any programming.

"You should still visit him. He can still hear you."

"Okay."

"He'll only be a few blocks away."

"Okay."

"You're going to visit him, right?"

"Okay."

My mother delighted in telling me what to do, and I found a not too small measure of satisfaction doing the exact opposite.

She also told me that Grandpop's apartment was fully furnished, so I wouldn't have to worry about pots, pans or utensils. Not that I owned much of that stuff. My worldly possessions included a crate of old LPs from the 1960s and 70s; a box of Hunter S. Thompson and Charles Bukowski paperbacks—standard issue for journalists; another box of vintage paperback mysteries; a six-year-old Mac laptop; a three-year-old cell phone that didn't close right; and finally, two trash bags full of clothes and other assorted junk I've been dragging around for fifteen years, from Philly to New York City and back.

It's sad when your worldly possessions fit into a 2009 Toyota Prius.

On the upside, we finished unloading in less than thirty minutes, even though it was three flights up to Apartment 3-A. I drove Meghan's Prius to the Frankford Hospital garage a few blocks away, where I assumed it would be reasonably safe. After all, doctors parked there, right?

Meghan gave me a playful punch in the arm.

"So, what now?"

"Well, I was about to have my boy Tino mix me a gin gimlet before retiring to the terrace to watch the sunset."

"Send Tino home for the night. Let's get drunk on beer."

"Excellent suggestion. But I'll have to go get your car again."

"What, and drive back wasted? Let's go downstairs and buy a few sixes."

"Downstairs?"

"The bodega. They sell beer. I saw the signs in the window and everything."

So we walked downstairs to the bodega. I bought two sixes from Willie Shahid—though I didn't know his name yet. Meghan looked like she was having a grand old time, buying beer in Frankford. Meanwhile, I worried some crackhead in a ski mask was going to pop in, wave a gun around and ask for the keys to the late-model Prius parked in the hospital garage up the street.

I was also mildly alarmed when the tab for two sixes of Yuengling came to \$18, leaving me with about five bucks until my final paycheck was direct deposited the next day. But hey, the lady wanted to get her beer on. Tonight, money was no object.

Tonight, we were toasting my sad return home.

About an hour later I'd killed four of the Yuenglings and lined the empties up on top of Grandpop Henry's massive cherrywood desk. Meghan, first beer still in hand, was on the floor going through his stuff without shyness or apology.

"I'm a snoop."

There wasn't much to Apartment 3-A—just a big room with a bathroom off to one side, a small closet on the other. A rusty radiator in the corner for all your heating needs. A desktop circulating fan for cooling, which would do jack shit once summer really got under way. A small kitchenette with a miniature oven barely big enough for a TV dinner and a quarter-sized fridge that could accommodate beer or food, but not both at the same time.

Grandpop Henry moved here in 2002, but I'd never visited. I feel a little guilty about that—but then again, I also didn't go out of my way to return to Frankford either.

Every few minutes the thunder of the Frankford El smashed through the silence, and through the dirty front windows you could see the rushing silver of the train cars as they ground to a halt at the Margaret Street station, then, after a ten-second delay, started moving again, and the rumble would build to a deafening crescendo that bounced off the fronts of the buildings all the way down to the ne

station.

~~The place was reasonably clean—no nicotine buildup on the walls, no grease caked on the ceiling~~ of the kitchenette. Grandpop Henry, it seemed, owned only two pieces of furniture: a big houndstooth couch and the big cherrywood desk. No bed, no kitchen table, no chairs. Guess when it comes down to it, all you needed was something to sit on and something to put things on.

Still, the room was cluttered, a ridiculous amount of floor space devoted to cardboard boxes, plastic milk crates and shoe boxes crammed with papers. This was what Meghan picked through.

“What does your grandfather do for a living?”

“He’s retired. But he used to be a night watchman at a hospital. My mom told me he liked the hours, the lack of conscious people.”

“Huh.”

“What’s the *huh* for?”

“He’s got a lot of papers here. Newspaper clippings, genealogy charts, handwritten notes. A lot of medical reports, it looks like. I thought maybe he was a journalist or something. Like you.”

“My grandpop? I don’t think he was much of a reader.”

“Hmmm.”

After a while Meghan showed me a yellowed envelope.

“Henryk Wadcheck?”

She mispronounced it the way most people do: *wad-chek*. As in, check your wad. The kids in grade school figured it out pretty quick.

“My grandfather’s name. It’s Polish. And pronounced *vahd-chek*.”

“My, that’s *veeered*. So wait—is that your last name?”

“Technically.”

“Your name is Mickey Wadcheck? How did I not know this?”

“My dad played music under the name Anthony Wade. So I adopted Wade for my byline. You would, too, if you had a name like *vahd-chek*.”

Meghan smiled.

“You know I’m totally calling you Mr. Wadcheck from now on.”

“Please don’t.”

Bad enough I have “Mickey” for a handle. The name on my birth certificate is “Mick,” in honor of Messrs. Jagger and Ronson, two of my dad’s musician heroes. You can’t call a five-year-old “Mick,” of course, so it soon became “Mickey.” And my classmates right away thought of the mouse. My childhood was full of *M-I-C (see you real soon...gaywad!)* jokes, not to mention that horrible stretch in 1982 when Toni Basil totally friggin’ ruined my life. I was ten, and I swore a blood oath to crush the skull of the next person to tell me *I was so fine, so fine I blew their mind*. The only person who had it worse that year was a classmate named Eileen, who didn’t understand why her leering male classmates were suddenly talking about *coming on her*.

“Oh my God—will you look at this.”

Meghan crawled over and handed me a photo of a man in a WWII-era military uniform. My grandpop.

“He looks just like you, Mr. Wadcheck!”

“Don’t call me that. And yeah, I’ve been told there’s a resemblance, but I don’t see it. Maybe if you saw him in person...”

“Bah. You’re a dead ringer.”

I twisted open another Yuengling as Meghan picked through another box, sitting on the floor, legs crossed, shoeless. I liked the way her blond hair dangled in front of her face and it didn’t seem to bother her in the least.

“Did you two used to spend a lot of time together?”

~~“Not really. Grandpop Henry’s always been a little weird. Kind of gruff, spare-the-rod-spoil-the-child kind of guy. Imagine Walter Matthau in *Grumpy Old Men*.”~~

“I thought you two might be close, considering...”

She left that hanging midair, waiting for me to finish: *what had happened to my father*.

Late one night at McGillin’s Ale House, the oldest continuously operating bar in Philly, I’d told her about what had happened to my dad. She didn’t press, I didn’t elaborate. It had never come up again, until now.

I took another pull from my beer.

“Yeah, well, no. I see my grandmother a lot.”

“Define *a lot*.”

“Holidays? I see her for at least one or two of the important ones.”

“Thought as much. So they’re divorced?”

“A long time ago. My dad was ten or eleven, I think.”

I regretted bringing my dad up, because whenever I thought about him with alcohol in my system, I started getting pissed off and morose. And I didn’t want to be pissed off or morose in front of Meghan.

I tried to lighten the mood.

“So to recap: I’m jobless. I live in a bad neighborhood. And I don’t have much in the way of male role models.”

Meghan smiled, leaning up and touching my face. I loved the feel of her fingertips. They were cool and warm at the same time.

“And yet, you’re such a gentleman, Mr. Wadcheck.”

“Please don’t call me Mr. Wadcheck.”

We sat there together, pretty much easygoing quiet, for another hour or so. I finished two more beers and wondered how long I’d be stuck in this dump. This time Meghan and I were enjoying together was unlikely to happen again. I wouldn’t ask her to drive to Frankford again. Not in a million years.

So if I wanted to hang out with her again I’d have to take the El back down to Rittenhouse Square. And until I found a job, I couldn’t see myself doing that. What was I going to do, buy her a dog and ask her to sit with me by the little bronze goat in the park?

A few minutes before midnight, just as I was really starting to dread the idea of walking Meghan down Frankford Avenue back to her car, she blindsided me.

“Hey, you mind if I crash here for the night?”

My stomach did a happy little flip. But I played it cool.

“Yeah, sure. I mean, no, I don’t mind. That would be great. Really great.”

I was so smooth it sometimes hurt.

There was no bed—just the scratchy houndstooth couch, which Meghan discovered was a pullout. I prayed for clean sheets; God, for once, heard my plea. Meghan wrestled a fitted sheet onto the wafer-thin mattress as I tugged some cases over pillows.

“Good night,” I told Meghan’s shape.

“Goot night, Meester Vahhhdcheck.”

“You’re hilarious.”

“Vyyy know.”

We settled in for sleep. Well, she did, anyway.

I sat up and watched her for a while. Her lips were parted slightly, long blond hair fanning the lumpy pillow—a perfect vision of peace. Then again, Meghan seems at ease in any given environment. Put her in a prix fixe Walnut Street restaurant or a South Street dive on PBR and Jack night. She belongs, either way.

And she can pretty much float in and out of any situation she wants. Once I asked her what she did for a living, and she told me she was “deferring life.” Meghan can do this because she is the youngest daughter of a powerful Center City lawyer.

I, on the other hand, am the son of a dead hippie musician, and I feel out of place pretty much everywhere. Even people in dives don’t seem too sure about me. I believe that was either my saving grace as a reporter, or my undoing. John Gregory Dunne once wrote that reporters were supposed to feel like outcasts, hands and noses pressed up against the glass, watching the party on the other side. Sounded about right to me.

Nothing has ever happened between me and Meghan, a state of affairs that seems likely to continue the rest of our natural lives. I belong on the other side of the glass. I am supposed to be content to know that a woman like Meghan exists.

But why had she insisted on giving me a ride? Was this a goodbye visit? Was she just bored? Or maybe...

Maybe it was nothing at all.

A few hours later my eyes popped open, my head pounding. Probably a combination of too many beers and no food. I tossed. I turned. The humidity in the apartment was thick as an afghan blanket. Once in a while I’d glance over at Meghan. She still looked perfect.

I rolled out of bed and padded my way to the bathroom mirror, where I was confronted by a sweaty, disheveled thirty-seven-year-old who looked like he needed a nap and a hug. I splashed water over his face, cupped some into his mouth and urged him to spit.

Grandpop Henry’s bathroom was strictly no frills—just a shower stall with an opaque glass door, sink and medicine cabinet. Black-and-white-checkered tile on the floor, framed photograph of a fishing boat above the toilet. An old man’s bathroom.

I dried my face, opened the medicine cabinet door. Something banged against the wall. I pulled the door back a few inches. A metal clasp had been mounted on it. And on top of the toilet tank was an open rusty padlock. Did Grandpop actually padlock his medicine cabinet shut at night? In case what-junkies broke in and stole his denture cream?

I found an oversized vintage jar of Tylenol with a worn and cracked label. Old people never throw anything away. I glanced at the expiration date: September 1982. Not exactly promising. Wasn’t that the time around the whole tampering scare? I remember being ten years old and my mother throwing away every medicine bottle in the house, Tylenol brand or otherwise.

But the pills inside looked okay. It was entirely possible—likely, even—that my grandpop just used the same oversized plastic bottle and replenished the pills whenever he ran out. So I tapped four into my palm. They looked like 250-milligram tablets; a thousand sounded right. A few pain relievers in the middle of the night goes a long way toward easing a morning hangover.

I swallowed them, scooped more water into my mouth, swirled for a second, then spit. Chances were slim that Meghan would wake up and decide to make out with me, but I didn’t want my mouth tasting like a bar sink, just in case.

I went back to bed, slid in next to Meghan and tucked my left arm under my pillow. She was in deep sleep. I was tired, too. Long day.

I nodded off for a second and then woke up in someone else’s room.

II

Good as Dead

I was on a cold hardwood floor. No sofa bed, no blanket, no pillow.

No Meghan.

The room looked like my grandpop's apartment, only someone had redecorated the place while I'd been sleeping. The front windows were covered with brown cardboard and masking tape. Tiny needles of light from the El station outside shot out from between the cracks. It was dark in here, but I could make out framed photos on the walls, and in the corner, a potted fern. All of the clutter—the boxes, the milk crates—was gone.

I heard the sound of groaning wood and turned to see a dark-haired woman, about my age, maybe a little older, sitting on a sofa behind me. She didn't seem to notice me. She was pretty, but had tired eyes, and wore a dress with little multicolored dots that look like they jumped off a bag of Wonder Bread.

"Uh, hi," I said.

She started speaking without making eye contact.

"You need a break. Come out with me. Have an old-fashioned. My treat."

"Excuse me?"

She used her palms to smooth out her Wonder Bread dress, then stood up and walked right by me. Like I wasn't even there.

I pushed myself up off the floor, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Had I been sleepwalking? Did I wander into someone else's apartment on a different floor? The layout of this room was identical to my grandpop's apartment. Maybe I was in 2-A, or something. Of course, I had no idea how I might have pulled off such a trick.

Across the room the Wonder Bread Woman picked up a pack of Lucky Strikes from the top of my grandpop's polished wooden desk. It looked like the same desk on which I'd lined up my empties a short while ago. Only now there was a big guy sitting behind the desk—a seriously big guy. He wore a wrinkled white shirt, and the sleeves were rolled up, revealing forearm hair thick enough to catch flies.

The woman shook a cigarette loose, clicked open a metal snap lighter, puffed the cigarette to life.

The big guy sighed.

"I still need to type up these reports and I have someone coming by shortly for a session," he said.

"You work too many nights, Mitchell," the woman said.

"I have to. It's part of the exp...job."

"There are more interesting ways to spend the night than talking to boring patients about their dreams. You could, for instance, be talking to me."

There was an awkward silence. Awkward for me, mostly. The fat guy behind the desk—Mitchell—finally broke it.

"Look, you should go downstairs to your boy, Erna. Feed him some dinner. It's late. He's probably starving."

"The boy's fine," she said. "He knows how to open a can."

Mitchell sighed and sat back in his chair. The floorboards creaked under his weight.

"Erna, sometimes I wonder if it was a mistake to let you have an apartment here."

"Admit it. You love having me around."

“Not when I have work to do.”

Okay, whatever was going on here, it was none of my business, and I should get the hell out. I took a few cautious steps toward the desk.

“Hey, yeah,” I said. “Look—Mitchell? Erna? I’m really sorry, guys. I don’t know what happened but I’ll show myself out, okay?”

They didn’t seem to hear me.

They didn’t react to me at all.

“Come on, Mitchell, don’t be a square your whole life,” Erna said. “Just one old-fashioned at Brady’s. Or maybe a beer. It’s quitting time. I want to have a little fuuuuuun.”

“It’s Tuesday night,” Mitchell said, “and you should be going home to bed.”

“You always say that. And you never join me.”

“Stop it. You should really check on your boy.”

I was beginning to get a little freaked out so I started waving my arms.

“Uh...Yo! Over here. Can you people really not see me, or are you just screwing around?”

“Stop worrying about the boy,” Erna said. “You’re always telling me what to do with him. You act like he’s yours sometimes.”

“No, I don’t. I’m not good with kids.”

“I’m not asking you to be. Which is why he’s downstairs and I’m asking you out for a drink.”

Erna took a final drag from her cigarette, then blew the smoke out long and slow before mashing the butt in a glass ashtray on Mitchell’s desk. I noticed a black nameplate on a brass holder: DR. MITCHELL DEMEO. Doctor, huh? I checked the rest of the room. There were two filing cabinets shoved up against one wall.

Then I realized this wasn’t an apartment; this was an office. How the hell did I end up in a doctor’s office?

Erna turned and walked past me, the rough fabric of her dress brushing against my bare arm. She sat back down on the couch, which was more of a high-backed lounge chair, all dark wood and maroon cushions. Her polka-dot dress flowed around her. She turned her feet inward and stared off into nothing. She was pouting.

“You never want to do anything fun,” she said.

With nothing else to do, I sat down next to her. Maybe one of these two crackheads would notice me then. My limbs felt impossibly heavy, as if invisible weights had been strapped to my wrists and ankles. I needed a minute to think. I turned to Erna and drilled my eyes into the side of her head.

“So, just to be clear,” I said, “you can’t hear a thing I’m saying, can you?”

Erna said nothing.

“Not one thing.”

Erna said nothing.

“Like I’m not even here.”

Still nothing.

“I’ve got this rash on my testicles that, I swear, is brighter than those red dots on your dress.”

Still nothing.

“Okay then. Just wanted to have it straight.”

I might have been invisible to her, but I could smell her perfume, which was sweet and pungent. Her lips were open slightly, like she wanted to say something but was holding back. Outside, the El train cars rumbled down their tracks, vibrating the floorboards beneath our feet. I could hear them screech to a halt, the doors thump open, and after a short while, close again. This all felt real. *I* felt

real. Why couldn't these people see me?

~~“Come on, Mitchell, don't be an asshole. I'm not asking you to abandon your work. I'm just asking for one little drink.”~~

“Erna, please. Not tonight.”

She sighed, stood up, then padded softly across the room until she was standing next to Mitchell. Then she dropped to her knees. Mitchell pretended not to notice, but he was a bad actor. His eyes flicked to the left. On the floor, Erna tugged at his belt. It wouldn't come loose. She tugged again.

“Erna. You don't have to do this...”

“Ah, there we go. You're too tense. You need to relax.”

There was the soft metal purr of a zipper, and then Erna's head disappeared behind the desk. Mitchell let his oversized head fall back, mouth open in a fat O, and all of a sudden I really didn't want to be here.

I darted across the room, averting my eyes, wishing I could turn off my ears so I wouldn't hear the slurping.

Now that I was seeing it up close, the door also had a piece of cardboard taped over one panel of pebbled glass. I reached for the knob. It was slippery. I tried to turn it quietly, but I couldn't seem to maintain a hold on the bastard.

There was more slurping, more moaning.

I forgot about being stealthy. I grabbed the knob hard, like I wanted to crush it, and gave it a cruel twist to the right. Behind me a moan turned into an *oh that's right momma that's right*. The door latch clicked. The door opened with a creak.

“Wh-whoa...what was that?”

“Nothing, Mitchell. Just relax.”

The door went *clack* behind me. I looked down the hallway, which was dark but clean. The walls were gray and peeling. The threadbare carpet was gray, too, with faded pink floral designs blended into the fabric. Which was weird, because when I moved in earlier today the walls were painted off-white and the bare floor was covered in grime and dust. This was not the hallway I'd walked through earlier today. None of this made any sense whatsoever.

On the second-floor landing there were three doors leading to other apartments. As I walked by, the door to 2-C opened a crack. A sleepy-eyed boy of about twelve, with a shock of unruly red hair and wearing oddly old-fashioned footie pajamas, peeked out at me.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I'm nobody,” I said. “Go back to sleep.”

“Did you come from the doctor's office? Is my mom up there?”

Oh God. His mother was Erna. I didn't want to be the one to tell him that yeah, his mother was upstairs, but she was a little busy at the moment. Then I realized something.

“Wait,” I said. “You can see me, can't you?”

The kid narrowed his eyes skeptically.

“Are you one of the doc's patients?”

“No. I just moved in.”

“Moved in where?”

“Upstairs.”

“Nobody lives upstairs. Nobody except the doctor. And he doesn't even live there. That's his office. Who are you?”

“What I am is really confused and lost and I'm starting to think this is one long, weird-ass dream. What do you think? Do you think we're both dreaming right now?”

His eyes went wide. He quickly slammed the door shut.

Okay. So to recap: I wasn't totally invisible. I was in the correct apartment building.

~~Only, I wasn't.~~

I needed some fresh air. Maybe that would wake me up. Maybe I could walk downstairs to that beer bodega and have a nice cold one while I waited for consciousness to return. That would be a nice way to pass the rest of a dream, right?

I stepped outside the front door, expecting a sticky wave of early June humidity. Instead, a gust of icy air sliced through my body. Jesus Christ, did the temperature just drop sixty degrees?

Then I looked down Frankford Avenue. It took my brain a few seconds to register what I was seeing.

Cars.

Very, very old cars.

Frankford Avenue was lined with them Buicks, Cadillacs, Dodges, Fords, Pontiacs. All of them vintage autos you don't see outside of 1970s crime flicks. Giant slabs of American-made steel. It was as if someone had moved all of the normal cars off the street in preparation for a 1970s muscle car show. Which didn't make sense. If you were throwing a vintage auto show, you weren't going to throw it under the El.

Another cannon blast of freezing air cut through my body so hard my eyes teared up. I'd never had a dream this vivid before.

This was still Frankford Avenue—sort of. The El was still up above me, but the framework was the old green metal one they tore down in the late 1980s. The store windows were naked—not a single metal security shutter in sight. And the stores were all different. Candy shops and children's clothing emporiums and nonchain drugstores, with hand-painted paper sale signs advertising new products and sale prices taped to the windows.

More jarring was the fact that my grandpop's block was no longer a broken smile. All eight buildings were there, constituting a full block. There was a diner. A lingerie shop. The old original El station, with the pizza stand on the ground floor. The bodega on the ground floor was gone; instead, it was an old-fashioned delicatessen.

This was a dream, then. I was dreaming about the Frankford I knew as a kid.

But these weren't hazy, sunbaked Polaroid childhood memories. This was Frankford after dark, and when I was a kid I was never allowed out on the streets of Frankford this late at night.

I thought about going back inside, finding some dream clothes in an imaginary closet somewhere and coming back out to explore. But even though I was shivering, I couldn't resist the urge to go exploring right now.

I walked around in a daze. Frankford Avenue looked more cramped than I remembered, the El not quite as high above me. There were no empty storefronts. There was very little graffiti. This was like a movie set Frankford, built to approximate what it must have looked like in happier times. Was remembering all of this with any degree of accuracy? Or was I making all of this shit up?

Somewhere around Church Street, about ten blocks away, I felt something whip around my leg—a sheet of newspaper. My eyes were drawn to the headlines first, but the headlines made no sense:

SAIGON ENDORSES NIXON'S VISIT TO CHINA

I glanced at the old-timey font on the top of the paper, expecting it to read *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

But instead it was *The Evening Bulletin*, a newspaper that had been shuttered for close to thirty years now. In the right-hand corner, a black box told me I was holding the four-star sports edition. The cover price was twenty-five cents.

The date: *February 22, 1972*.

Which happened to be the day I was born.

The night sky turned a shade brighter, as if God suddenly remembered *shit, yeah, morning, better flip the dimmer switch up a little*. A dizziness washed over me like I'd been mainlining tequila.

There were more people out now, rushing past me, and they couldn't see me—the shivering guy in T-shirt and gym shorts on a freezing morning in late February 1972. They were working-class Frankford people, in coveralls and slacks and dresses, making their way from their rowhomes and apartments to the El station for their daily commute. I wondered what downtown Philly looked like now, in this dream 1972. Maybe I should follow the crowd, hop on the El with them, check the city out. Look at the skyline in the time before they broke the City Hall height barrier.

But then another head rush hit me. My skin started to itch and burn. I decided to skip my trip down to dream Center City and go back to the apartment...the office...whatever. Maybe Erna was done blowing Mitchell by now. Maybe I could lay down on that stiff-looking sofa and then wake up back in bed with Meghan. I could question the mechanics later.

My skin was really burning now. I started to worry a little. I didn't want to dream about burning to death on Frankford Avenue only to wake up with a space heater knocked over on top of me and discover, *wow, I've actually burned to death*. Cue Rod Serling.

I raced down the avenue, weaving in and around people who couldn't see me. Only one dude, pushing a broom in front of his corner drugstore, seemed to follow me with his eyes.

By the time I reached the third floor of Grandpop Henry's building I was having serious head rushes. Usually one head rush was enough to make you slow down, but these kept coming. I needed to lie down. Or wake up. Or something. I reached for the doorknob.

It was locked.

I tugged at it, then remembered. It had self-locked when I'd left.

Wait, what was I talking about? This was a goddamned dream, so it shouldn't matter if it self-locked. I yanked on it even harder, kicked the door, screamed at it. Come on, dream door. Open. Up. Now. Erna? You in there? You mind removing yourself from Mitchell's lap long enough to answer the door, maybe?

The early-morning sun found the east-facing window. Light prised all the hell over the place. My skin felt unreasonably hot, Hiroshima-afterblast hot, ready to melt at the slightest touch.

I threw a shoulder at the door, hoping the dream construction crews who dealt with 1972 used cheap flakeboard. But the door held firm.

I slammed my shoulder into it, then again, and again, throwing an increasing amount of body weight with every blow.

Still nothing.

The sun was blazing through the window at the end of the hall in earnest now. I raised my left hand to shield my eyes and immediately felt a searing pain, like I'd grabbed the wrong end of a hot curling iron. I glanced up through watery eyes just in time to watch a beam of light burn away two of my fingers.

First the ring finger.

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