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The Rat on Fire
A Novel

GEORGE V. HIGGINS

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"I DO NOT NEED this shit," Terry Mooney said. He was a small man with a lot of red hair, wire-rimmed glasses that were tinted pink and a wardrobe of three-piece glen plaid suits.

I hate the little bastard, John Roscommon thought after their meeting. Roscommon had said that aloud on many occasions when there was nobody around but other State cops. "The little bastard," Roscommon said, "here he is, about thirty years old, got more hair on him'n a fuckin' buffalo but less brains, and he's got this diploma from some half-assed law school and that gives him the right to order everybody around. *He* thinks. The little shit.

"This guy," Roscommon told Mickey and Don and every other trooper in the Attorney General's office, "this guy was appointed directly by God to clear up all of the problems of suffering mankind. Here I am, I have been running around the world and dealing with the Japanese when I was a kid with fuzz on my cheeks and they have got Nambu machine guns with which they have got every intention of blowing my ass off before we finally get Douglas MacArthur safely at home in Tokyo, and they didn't make it. I went out there in the goddamned jungle like I was Wyatt fuckin' Earp and I keep my head down and the goddamned Jap blows my ass off and I in the meantime blow the asses off of several Japs.

"I live through that," Roscommon said. "I will not eat beef teriyaki and I will not go down to some fake Jap restaurant where the chef's idea a good time is waving a knife around and screaming 'Banzai' every time somebody heaves a piece of cow in front of him, but I come out of my adventures with the Japs all in one piece and that is pretty good going, considering what I see happen to some other fellows I was somewhat acquainted with for a little while.

"I live through that," Roscommon said. "I live through several small labor disputes that some gentlemen on this side of the Pacific had with the warden and the guards down at the various jails we maintain for the care and feeding of guys that make everybody nervous when they are out on the street. There was one night when some of my previous fellow officers went out to deliver a piece of paper to a guy that took French leave from the prison and was ordered to join them because the word was that he had every sidearm Colt Firearms ever made and one or two extra from Remington Arms that you could put up against your shoulder for a little extra range. And he did, too, and he was using them, and I got out of there in one piece.

"I have never had an ulcer," Roscommon said. "I am fifty-eight years old and if I do say so myself, I am in the prime of health and the pink of fucking goddamned good condition. But I ever *get* an ulcer, if I ever *do* fall down and collapse on the floor with motherfuckin' apoplexy, it will be the fault of Terry Mooney."

Roscommon got out of the wooden chair and began to pace around the conference room. His face reddened upward from the collar of his shirt to the roots of his gray hair. Mickey Sweeney and Donald Carbone, corporals in the Massachusetts State Police, looked at the floor and did not permit any expression of amusement to attract the attention of Detective Lieutenant Inspector John Roscommon.

"So," Roscommon said, "we got no goddamned choice. That little piece of shit has got a la

degree and for some reason that escapes my sawtoothed mind, the Attorney General has seen fit to make him a full-fledged prosecutor. There're times when I think *that* guy's playing with no more'n forty-four cards too, puttin' a jerk of a kid like that in charge of anything bigger than a head-on collision of two skateboards. But he did it and we're stuck with it, the damned fools that we are."

"John," Mickey said, "what's he want?"

"He wants to get reelected, naturally," Roscommon said. "He's got another year before he goes to bat again, and therefore naturally he is sucking every minority and majority hind that he can find, and he is going to take over the work every District Attorney between here and Albany until he *gets* reelected. Then he will relax and maybe then we can all calm down a little and maybe even get some work done.

"In the meantime," Roscommon said, "what he has got is a whole bunch of people that's beating on his head and griping all the time about various things that they do not approve of. Some of them're complaining about the oil companies and how they're nailing everybody to the mast, and some of them're complaining about being broads and that means they can't get their bosses to leave them alone and can't get free abortions after their bosses get through with them. He's got guys that want him to sue the Red Sox because the seats in the bleachers're too expensive, and he's got guys that don't approve of dogs taking a shit on Beacon Hill. He's got women that spend the whole day at the State House so they can scream at him that we shouldn't have nuclear power, and he's got people there that bring kids and yell about how they should get forty grand a year on welfare and he should go sue somebody so they can. I am telling you, if his porch light is out, and I think it is, I also know the reason why. I'll be damned if I can figure out how the hell he stands it.

"Now," Roscommon said, "one of the things he does on some day when he's got six shingles off the roof and all these people yelling at him, one of the things he does is hire this fuckin' Terry Mooney kid. He hadda be nuts to do that. You know what Terry Mooney thinks? Terry Mooney thinks us cops're too soft on crime. Terry Mooney thinks that until Terry Mooney came along and became a goddamned prosecutor, people got away with murder all over the place. And Terry Mooney is going to put a stop to it, and also make the AG think that if he did one thing right in the whole time he was in office, it was hiring Terry Mooney. Terry Mooney thinks that when the AG runs again, he is gonna spend most of his time out in Belchertown and Clinton telling everybody that we got the whole crime thing under control now, on account of they elected him and he hired Terry Mooney. The AG does not believe this, but he has got Terry Mooney believing it and that is enough to give me a case of piles, so I can tell you that."

Sweeney began to laugh.

"Shut up," Roscommon said. "You think this is funny, you wise little prick? Listen up because you won't when you get through.

"Mooney can read," Roscommon said. "I know it's hard to believe, but he can. You would've thought a man that reads as well as he does would've learned something about judgment, but he didn't and there's nothing we can do about that, either.

"What that little turd has done," Roscommon said, "is somehow he persuaded the newspapers to bring him copies every morning, and he also watches the television every night and apparently takes in a lot of what is said. So he goes to the AG and he says to him

‘There’re people that’re burning buildings down in Boston.’ ”

“No shit,” Sweeney said.

“ ‘And furthermore,’ says Mooney, ‘they are doing it for *money*.’ ”

“Goodness gracious,” Sweeney said.

“Heavens to Betsy,” Carbone said.

“Who would’ve dreamed of it?” Roscommon said. “I’m telling you guys, this kid’s as sharp as a tack. There’s no fooling him.

“ ‘Now,’ says the genius Mooney, ‘here is what you should do: you should set up a special outfit that doesn’t do a god-damned thing in the world except run around and catch guys that play with matches. And you should put me in charge of it and give me every single cop in the world that isn’t off guarding the President or the Pope and never mind all that simple-minded shit about catching people that’re looting the banks, and then make an announcement about how you’re gonna stand up for the rights of all the poor people that live in the buildings where the fires start, and that will make you golden. How is that?’ And the Attorney General says, ‘Mooney, you are a gentleman, a scholar, a good friend and a loyal knight of the tabularound, and someday I will dub thee *Sir Terrence*, if everything else works out all right and you get reelected. Go plague the shit out of Roscommon.’

“Which, of course,” Roscommon said, “he did. And therefore I am plaguing you.”

“Oh,” Sweeney said.

“Yeah,” Roscommon said, “that’s nowhere near as goddamned funny, is it? Uh-uh. Now it’s serious. Now *you’re* looking around for the Preparation H. I got bad news for you—there isn’t any. You are going to catch all the firebugs and make everybody safe in their beds, so that the AG can go out and tell everybody that him and Terry Mooney’ve ended the terrible menace of people setting fires and doing other evil things.”

“Right,” Carbone said. He got up. “Well, how long we got? I mean, I realize it’d probably be nice if we had the whole thing wrapped up by lunchtime tomorrow, but it’s prolly going to take at least until maybe three-thirty or so.”

“Siddown,” Roscommon said.

“John,” Carbone said, “we got fire marshals for that kind of shit.”

“This is true,” Roscommon said. “And if you know any fire marshals ... You know any fire marshals?”

“One or two,” Carbone said.

“One or two,” Roscommon said. “Now, Corporal, thinking back over what you know about the one or two fire marshals that you know, do you think maybe there might be an explanation for *why* we got this kind of shit?”

“Yup,” Carbone said.

“Sure,” Roscommon said. “You’re just as smart as Mooney. They can’t fool you, neither. But they sure can fool the fire marshals, and they do. They fool them all the time. The fire marshals are fire marshals because they couldn’t find their way out of a phone booth if they had a map and a guide and one of those big dogs with a harness on it, and some desk sergeant got a look at them one night and said to himself, ‘This guy is so fuckin’ stupid he couldn’t fall out of a tree and land on the ground, and I think I will get him out the barracks before he tries to brush his teeth with his revolver and blows somebody else’s head off.’ ”

“Jesus Christ, John,” Sweeney said, “I don’t know anything about fires. Don doesn’t know

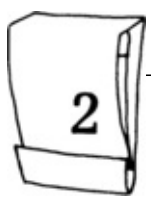
anything about fires. Hell, I'm not even sure Don knows anything about getting his pants on and if he does know anything, it's what I told him."

"Sure," Carbone said, "you're the guy that told me to pull them on over my head."

"You're not investigating fires," Roscommon said.

"You got to excuse me," Sweeney said, "I had the distinct impression I been sittin' here about three weeks listening to you yell about this Mooney kid and the fires and the AG and whole bunch of other shit, and now I got it wrong?"

"You are not investigating fires," Roscommon said. "Now, all right? Terry Mooney does not know this, or much of anything else, and I do not tell Terry Mooney much of anything because the first time he finds something else out, he thinks it is a good idea to run around all over town shooting his mouth off about this great thing he just learned that everybody else in town knew for years but nobody could ever prove. What you are investigating is not fire but fire *marshals* and people who take money for setting fires and then give some of that money to fire marshals so that the fire marshals will not be too critical when they come around and look at someplace that was torched. This means that you are investigating Bill Malatesta, who is a fire marshal, and a scumbag loser name of Proctor that I put away once and I will put away again as soon as I get a halfway decent chance, and that will get Mooney and the AG off of my back. What do you guys know about trucks?"



THE FAT MAN WORE a white shirt, the sleeves rolled up over the elbows and the fabric straining over the biceps. The top three buttons were undone, showing the neck of the sleeveless t-shirt. He wore brown suit pants with a pleated front and his black hair was sparse. He said, "The principal thing that there is about this, that is bothering me basically, is the fuckin' niggers."

The other man was about forty. He was in reasonably good shape. He wore a lightweight blue madras sport coat and a light blue tie embroidered with white birds. His shirt was light blue and so were his slacks. He had gray-black curly hair, cut short. He said, "I don't see what's botherin' you. What's to bother? You got to get them out of there. There isn't no goddamned other thing that you can do about it, because there isn't anything that anybody else could do about it. Until you get those niggers out of there, nobody can do anything. You leave the boogies in, they are in and that is all there is to it. There's no way anybody can do a fuckin' thing for you if those niggers're still in it and something happens. The fuckin' *Globe* go nuts if there was niggers in there and something happened. It'd be worse'n if the Cardinal was in there and something happened, for Christ sake. I told you that before and I'm telling you that now, and anybody who tells you different's just blowing smoke up your ass and gonna get you in a whole mess of shit that you'll never get out of. That's the way it is."

They sat in a booth at the Scandinavian Pastry Shop on Old Colony Boulevard in Dorchester. The fluorescent lights reflected on the fat man's sweaty scalp and the white Formica tabletop. Large moths bumped the plate-glass window from the outside and the air conditioning droned on with the kind of noise that a motor makes when it is running short on oil and some system attached to it is making unusually heavy demands. "Twenty years ago," the fat man said, "twenty years ago, nobody would've given a shit." The fat man's name was Leo Proctor.

"Twenty years ago," the other man said, "there probably weren't any coons in there. Just nice, respectable, middle-aged white people that paid their fuckin' rent on time and didn't put coal inna bathtub or rip out the plumbin' or bypass the gas meter and break all the windows. That was a long time ago. Twenty years ago, there wouldn't be this problem you got."

Two truckers sat in green cotton uniforms at the counter. They had large sweat stains on their armpits and the belt area of their backs. "I meet this guy," Mickey said, "the diner on at Nine and Twenty?"

"The fuck're you doin' there?" Don said. "You got time enough, fuck around on those roads? The hell you didn't take the Pike?"

"Jesus Christ," Mickey said, "will you lemme fuckin' *talk* for once? You always have to go around interrupting me all the time, you asshole? I'm tryin' to tell you something."

"So," Don said, "tell me something. I'm listening. I'll listen to any asshole. Doesn't mean I'm gonna pay attention, but I'll listen."

"I had trouble with the unit," Mickey said. "I got off at Auburn, see if maybe there was someone could do somethin', maybe fix it so I could drive it home and get Carl to work on it."

inna morning. So, and there's nobody around. I said, 'Some kind of all-night service you got here, Charlie,' and by then I lost an hour already so I figure I might as well get a bowl of soup for myself. And I go down the diner and there's this guy in there. I never saw this guy before in my life. And all of a sudden he's gonna have this conversation with me. I'm trying to drink my coffee, and this guy I never saw before in my life says to me, 'Come on, we'll go see Auburn Alice, the Long-haul Lady. So, only a couple miles. I ain't got my rocks off since Buffalo.'

"So I looked at him. I says, 'You crazy? I gotta loada frozen chickens in there and the compressor goin' nuts and it's gotta be seventy-five degrees out there, which means the goddamned thing's gonna break down on me any minute, and you're tellin' me I oughta stop for nookie? I do that and that damned thing's gonna quit on me while I'm in there and I'll go to Hyde Park with that truck smellin' worse'n Alice after a hard night. That bastard down there, the night checker, he didn't shit in years, he's gonna take one whiff and tell me "Rotten. Keep 'em." Which is gonna leave me with a busted rig and no dough and a mad wife which I already had and didn't want, and a three-ton loada spoiled chickens. Which I don't think my kids're gonna want to eat, and which I certainly don't want and right now I haven't got, like I do have the wife.' So I says to him, 'No, there's enough rotten shit in my life as it is.' "

"Well," Malatesta said, "inna first place, you gotta keep in mind that if you got yourself mixed up with Fein you are already obviously not very smart and you probably need as many guys as you can find, if you got any plans involve staying out of jail, on account of if you're listening to Fein, if you are in a position which has got you listening to him, then you obviously do not know how things are yourself, on your own, and you need somebody to tell you. I was you, I would not want to listen to Fein either, because I have got good reasons to know that Fein is an asshole, is what Fein is, and the only reason nobody has put him away for a long time yet's because he's just cute enough to find a bigger asshole'n himself to do the things he ought to've gone to jail for himself. Which in this case is you."

"I don't have no choice," Proctor said. He rubbed his hand over his face. "I did that stupid thing.... The last stupid thing I did recently was when Clinker Carroll got outta Walpole there and they had this homecoming thing for him the Saturday night before Memorial Day up there in that joint in Swampscott, you know?"

"Clinker didn't last long, I'll say that for him," Malatesta said. "How long was he on the street, he got hooked again? A week? Less'n that."

"About a week," Proctor said. "Week or ten days. He has the usual problem which a guy has when he gets out, which is he gets all itchy with all the catchin' up he's gotta do. You come out of one of those places, they oughta give you a new car, good-lookin' broad, ten grand walkin' around, save a hell of a lot of chasin' guys around that just came out. But, he's out on bail now. Which is another thing of course."

"Anyway," Proctor said, "like a fuckin' asshole I go to Clinker's party. And like the horse hang-down that I am, I get myself shitfaced. And I agree, I'm gonna take this guy home that I don't even know his *name*, even, that lives in Framingham. And naturally, we get inna car on the Mass Pike and he's drunker'n a goat himself, and we're doing sixty-five, seventy. I'm a mile over the road and it's a perfect night for that, of course, because there ain't no more cops out there that weekend'n there are at your average riot down the prison, and what does this asshole

that I don't even know, that I'm being nice enough, I'm drivin' him home? What does *he* want to do? He wants to fight.

"I couldn't fuckin' believe it," the fat man said. "As drunk as I was, and I was pretty drunk I could not fuckin' believe it. Just a little piece of shit, this guy, and he didn't have no knife or anything, and I says to him, I am tryin' talk him out of it, I couldn't believe it. I'm all over the road. By now I'm doin' at least eighty. Everything I see in front of me, there's two of them. Every car's got at least four taillights and ones that come with four've got eight, maybe sixteen, and I went through two tollbooths without, I didn't hit nothin', and I'm trying to *reason* with this crazy drunken cocksucker. 'Will you for the luvva Christ and his goddamned Blessed Mother calm down before you get us both in the slammer and dead at the same time?' And he won't, naturally, so we get out there in Weston and there's nothin' around but weeds and water and he hits me onna head. Right onna fuckin' head, and I'm doin' eighty and I already got enough things on my mind with seeing double and everything, and he clocks me onna head." "Auburn Alice," Don said. "She the one that advertises, Channel 19?"

"I guess so," Mickey said. "I never turn the damned CB on anymore. Too many asshole ratchet-mouthin' shit at each other. I never heard of her. I had six thousand pounds of chicken in there I was worried about, and that was more'n enough for me. I dunno who she is."

"That's the one," Don said. "That woman's got diseases they never even heard of in Vietnam. She's infected guys from Seattle, and guys from Monterey've given her new stuff to give to guys from Louisville. You oughta thank the Lord you had them goddamned chicken. You didn't, you'd have something now they couldn't cure unless they used a blowtorch on you."

"What'd he hit you with?" Malatesta said.

"His fist," Proctor said. "He didn't have no gun or anything, thank God. And, it didn't really hurt me much. He's just a little guy. And he was also drunk. His aim wasn't too good, even though he was strong. But it surprised me, you know? I was having trouble understanding things. The guy shocked the shit out of me. I didn't expect it. I thought he was just screamin' and hollerin' and acting like a goddamned asshole and I was yelling at him and thinking I was either gonna calm the guy down before I got him home or else when I got him home and the car was stopped I would get out with him and cold-cock him into the rosebushes or something, and he got quiet. Then he comes barrel-assin' out of nowhere and belts me."

"So," Proctor said, "naturally I do the reasonable thing and pull over the side of the road and stop the car and take the keys and get out and open his door and drag him out, beat the livin' shit out of him and throw him inna goddamned lake, right? Wrong. I take my hands off the wheel and grab the little cocksucker. I am gonna beat the piss out of him. I don't have to take this kind of shit from some little pisspot like that, that I am doing a favor for that Clinker's friend anyway and I don't even know him. But I forget, of course, that I am right then doing eighty miles an hour in a car that I am the guy that's supposed to be steering it and I will tell you this: I am very glad this is the Mass Pike in Weston around three in the morning when there is much of nothing around on either side of me and it's not like I'm down on Gallivan Boulevard there on a weekday afternoon doing the same thing when some big fat nun starts marching a whole buncha second-graders across the street so they can sing at Benediction, all right? Because I got him all right and belted him right into Labor Day, b"

at the same time I sort of went off the road some. Into this little pond they got there.”

“Jesus,” Malatesta said.

“It was all right,” Proctor said. “It wasn’t really a pond, actually. Well, it was a *pond*, but wasn’t a very deep pond. The water just came up about, when you open the car door, a right? It came in the car then. It wasn’t too deep, and the bottom was all mud or else you could’ve driven through it like you would any other puddle that was just about as deep, only about a mile across, and the car stopped in the mud and I opened the door and the water came right in. Right up to about the bottom of the front seat, you know? If I’d’ve been able to keep going, I could’ve gone right across it. It was a little higher’n the seat, actually. Water all over the console and my tapes, but what the hell, huh? And I took out a few of them little trees on the way in. But, I never did like that Monte Carlo anyways. Lousy car. Lousy on gas. This guy Carter got any idea what he’s doing, you think, on the gas thing? Jesus, first he makes me, I can’t use nothing that burns the stuff with lead in it and then he tells me I can use none of the stuff that hasn’t got lead in it and when I do I can kiss my house goodbye. What the hell is he doing? You got any ideas?”

“No,” Malatesta said.

“Neither’ve I,” Proctor said. “I have no idea in the world what he is doing. I wished I could convince myself that he does. It’s bad enough, *I* got to be an asshole, but if the goddamned President’s an asshole we are all in trouble, including poor assholes like me that can’t stay out of trouble anyway, and *then* what the fuck we do, huh?”

“Anyway,” Proctor said, “I was thinkin’ about gettin’ rid the damned car anyway, although what I had in mind was, I was gonna sell it, not drown it, because it was all shot. But the water was kind of cold and it sobers me up. I’m soaked and I’m walkin’ around in the mud with the water up to my balls and it’s three inna morning, but then I think, Hey, somebody could’ve got themselves killed in this thing, and it could’ve been me, even. See, the little cocksucker, him I don’t care about. I wished he *was* dead, him causing all the trouble, except I don’t want him dead in my car, I want him dead in somebody else’s car.

“Because,” Leo said, “you know what them cops’re gonna do with somebody that’s got a record like I got, that he ends up inna swamp at three inna mornin’ and there’s a body of a dead guy inna car with him, or maybe inna swamp and there doesn’t happen to be no other way that body could’ve gotten there, huh? They’re gonna blame me for it, and then they’re gonna charge me manslaughter.

“This,” Leo said, “I do not need. He is a little shit and the whole goddamned world will be better off for all of us if he is dead, and that includes the cops, but I was glad he was alive. Because if he is dead, I certainly cannot afford to take the credit.”

“So what’d you do?” Malatesta said.

“Well,” Leo said, “like I said, what I did was sober up. Which maybe would’ve been a good idea earlier, when I wasn’t so tired and then maybe I never would’ve gotten myself in the mess where I drowned my own car like a cat. What am I, a United States Senator or something, I drown my own car? But it was not such a hot idea, because I decide I can charge a dog offa meat wagon and I am gonna think up this story that’ll explain the whole thing. When I am finished, the cop is probably gonna be cryin’ his eyes out and put me in for a reward, I was such a quick-witted citizen when this emergency hits and I probably even saved the guy’s life. The worthless little piece of shit he is that started the whole thing inna first

place.”

“What’d you tell them?” Malatesta said.

“I told them,” Proctor said, “I told them I was, I was standing there inna water up over my ankles, I sort of waded over to where I saw the headlights, and I would’ve been freezing my balls off except it was summer and anyway I was so shitfaced I was probably good for about twenty below, and honest to God, Billy, I must’ve thought I was Winston Churchill or something. Here is this cop. I saw something once that was also alive and was just as big, but it was gray and it couldn’t talk and it had a very long nose and I saw it in the circus when I took the kids the Garden and it cost me about seventy bucks and there was this guy that had on a silver suit and made a tiger jump on the back of this thing with a long nose and then the guy jumped on the tiger’s back and rode the two of them around the room and that big gray thing was an *elephant*. That’s how big this cop was.

“But he could talk,” Leo said. “He could talk and he did talk. What he said was impressive but he did not say as much as I did, which was my mistake. My ninth and tenth mistakes for the night, a little over my usual quota, maybe, but not that much over, and I told him that the tire blew and I steered it in the pond so I wouldn’t hit nobody that was alive.

“And he says,” Leo said, “he says, ‘Bullshit. Those tires’re all fine. They’re all that’s keeping that thing afloat.’ Which is when it occurs to me, maybe I better look at the tires, I’m gonna tell stories like that. I did. They were all fine. I wished I thought of doing that a little earlier maybe before the cop showed up, so I didn’t try something dumb as that.”

“What’d he do?” Malatesta said.

“The fuck you think he did?” Leo said. “For Christ sake, you’re a cop. The fuck’d you do. You’d write me up. You oughta know.”

“Yeah,” Malatesta said, “I guess I would’ve. I don’t think the same I used to.”

“He ran me in,” Leo said. “Driving Under, Driving So As To Endanger. Drunk. The usual stuff.”

“What about the passenger?” Billy said.

“Locked him up to sleep it off,” Leo said. “Let him go the next day. Which was when, of course, I hadda call Fein.”

“Well,” Billy said, “you are a sorry son of a bitch if you had to call Fein, and I don’t raise your chances none too good if that jamoke’s going to defend you at a trial in a court of law and all that stuff.”

“Billy,” Leo said, “I admit to being stupid. You yourself can ask me, and I will personally admit it. I only got an eighth-grade education and the stuff was gettin’ a little hard for me the year before that. The nuns down Our Lady of Victory practically made a public announcement and printed it in the newspaper that Leo Proctor was thick as shit and would never get anywhere except in jail, and they should’ve known they were right in the first place when they let him in even though his father was English but they hoped his Irish mother maybe gave him some sense and she didn’t.

“Well,” Leo said, “they were right about the jail, but they were wrong about the other part because I have gone and I have transcended what the nuns give me to the point at which I probably owe various people close to half a million dollars if I was to sit down and take the time to add them up, which I am not about to do, on account of how I do not need that shit. This is a great country and it is a land of opportunity, so that even a dumb shit like me, who

cannot get rid of a few noisy niggers, can wind up owing various people half a million dollars or so with just about no hope to God that he will ever pay them back. If this was not a great country, I would be out someplace with a shovel and some guy'd be whipping me on the naked back for not diggin' fast enough, but it is and so I'm not.

"Still," Leo said, "I am not so stupid that even I do not know that Four-flusher Fein is not your very best legal-type counselor and could on his best day probably not get Jack Kennedy off on a charge that he murdered Lee Harvey Oswald.

"The trouble is, Billy," Leo said, "the trouble is that when you owe various people about half a million dollars or so which you are not in a position to pay back right away, they start looking around all the time and gettin' jittery, you know? And they say, 'Gee, uh, Mister Proctor, we loaned you all that money and stuff and you bought these here buildings with it and everything that've got apartments in them and you're supposed to have people living there. But we took a look at the buildings and there don't seem to be a large number of people floatin' around. Oh, there's a few of the minority groups shuckin' and jivin' on your stoops and stuff like that, and we're certainly glad to see you're doing your bit for low-cost housing for the underprivileged. We mean it. You're a prince of a guy, and we got to compliment you for it. But then again on the other hand, we've been lookin' at your statements here for the past few months, and you haven't been payin' us.'

"Billy," Leo said, "you ever see one of them metal-framed bankers, with the gray hair and the three-piece suits and their black shoes and the glasses with the metal frames? You ever talk to one of them guys? They don't live in the real world, I'm tellin' you. What they do live in the banks. They got their desks out in front of everybody and that is where they live. They can't fuck, fight, frown, wash, shit or change their underwear. The hell, everybody going by on the street could see them and so could everybody at all the other desks on the red rug and I finally figured it out, how they do it: they hire people that don't do none of those things, so they don't need to.

"Now those guys, Billy," Leo said, "those guys're all in favor of helping everybody in the whole wide world as long as it don't involve none of their money. Which is another thing about bankers—they may be all vice-presidents or something, and they're making nine grand a year and they all eat lunch at Slagle's and have the vegetable special and the iced tea that goes with it and it costs a buck twenny-five and they leave a fifteen-cent tip, but there's millions in those vaults and it all belongs to them. Other people maybe put it there, and someday they're gonna come and take it out again, but in the meantime it all belongs to the bankers.

"What they are all for," Leo said, "they are all for helping the fuckin' niggers. They think helpin' niggers is the greatest thing since people started coming in and depositing the money, and the reason they think this is because if they don't ship that money out to help the niggers, on the understanding that they're gonna get it all back on time with plenty of interest, of course, pretty soon some hairy Jew kid with about ten degrees from Harvard's gonna get a poverty law grant and start dragging them out of the bank and into court, they're not doin' enough for civil rights and they should lose their charters. They are all for loanin' money to guys like me that're gonna rehab old joints and rent 'em out to low-income people until we do it and they find out them low-income people is fuckin' *niggers*, and if that wasn't bad enough, they don't pay their fuckin' rent, neither. Which means you're not making

payments on your fuckin' loans, and I bet you could dump a fuckin' rattler down a banker back without makin' him as nervous as he gets when you're not payin' off those goddamne loans.

"Now here is what it is, all right?" Leo said. "I will tell you what it is: fuckin' niggers've got *rights*. If the niggers can't find no apartments they can get a Jew or two and go to federal court and pretty soon every landlord in the city's gonna be in federal court with his own high priced loudmouth tryin' to stop the judge from throwin' him in jail because he didn't take every nigger that came down the street and make sure he had a warm bed and a good dinner in addition to, the roof didn't leak. But when the niggers get *in* the apartments, then it is a different story. They don't pay their rent. They stick out their lower lips and they look at you and they roll them big white eyes and they say, 'Muhfuck, I ain't payin' you no rent. I ain't payin' you no hundred thirty-five this month for them five rooms. I ain't been warm enough. You ain't got the heat up high enough. I is *withholdin'* mah rent until you gets the heat up there.' And then they go shuckin' and jivin' down the street and you just try to get them into court, collect from them. You can't get 'em into court and you can't get 'em out the building and they won't pay you nothin' while they're in it, and your lawyer costs you money but theirs is free.

"Try and tell a banker that, sometime," Leo said, "you got a half a day and nothin' else to do. He won't even hear you. He won't understand a single word you're saying. He will just keep telling you, you got to pay some money to him and it's not his responsibility, get it for you.

"And that, Billy boy," Leo said, "is when you learn to play with matches."

"Leo," Malatesta said, "that was a different kind of thing. A different kind of thing entirely. That was a vacant warehouse. There wasn't anybody living in it. The only thing in it was that old truck. I had no problem with that at all."

"That isn't what you told me, Billy," Leo said. "You said it'd take at least five hundred to get that one traced to the wiring."

"That was for somebody else," Billy said. "That was for somebody else I hadda take care of, or he would've gone down there and started poking around and then his price would've gone up. Double, at least. I wasn't in the same position then. I was new. I hadda clear things through guys. I didn't make a dime off of that deal."

"Yeah," Leo said.

"I didn't," Billy said. "I hadda keep that guy out of there. That was a dog-ass amateur job. If he'd've gone in there he would've known right off, the way those charrings, alligator burn showed, he would've known you torched it. I hadda keep him out."

"Yeah," Leo said. "Well, it don't matter. I'm outta warehouses now. I still got loans, and I still can't pay them, but now there's niggers livin' in the collateral, and I can't get 'em out. I'm no amateur anymore, but I can't get those bastards out. And I have got to do something."

"Don't come to me, you do," Billy said.

"Billy," Leo said, "I *already* came to you, long time ago. Don't give that kind of talk, an old buddy."

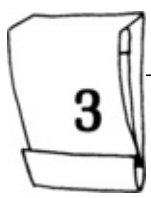
"Leo," Billy said, "you can come to me any time. I'm just telling you, I'm not gonna be able to cover you, you do. You touch off one of those joints with niggers in it, you just burn yourself one nigger, and you are on your own. You own those buildings, my friend. The

maybe aren't worth what you owe on them, but you own 'em, and if some tenant goes u
with the parapet roof, you'll be right behind them."

"Billy, my friend," Leo said, "you remember you asked me how come I hired Four-flush
Fein to represent me?"

"Yeah," Billy said.

"Well," Leo said, "now I am gonna tell you. I didn't hire Jerry. Jerry hired me."



MICKEY ASKED DON for a cigarette and learned that he had none. He got up from the counter and came over to the booth where Leo Proctor sat with Billy. “You wouldn’t have a smoke, would you?” he said.

“Sure,” Proctor said. He fished a pack of Winstons from his pocket. He handed it to the trucker, who took out one cigarette and returned the pack.

“Jesus Christ,” Mickey said, patting his pockets, “I haven’t got a match. I’m outta light too. I’m tryin’ to quit. You got a match?”

“Sure,” Leo said, producing a matchbook. The trucker lit the Winston and returned the matches. He thanked Leo and returned to the counter.

“That, Bill,” Leo said, “is what I’ve got. I’ve got the matches and the know-how and a criminal case that I can’t afford. I also got niggers inna joints and I can’t get ’em out. Thing is, Fein has got this ticket, he can practice law. And he has also got buildings with niggers in them and he can’t get them out. Only Fein don’t carry no matches. So what me and Fein figure, maybe we can do some business, you follow me? He will get me out of the court thing, and I will get his niggers outta his buildings, and then we will sit down together and figure out a way, get the niggers outta my buildings, which will get the bankers off my ass.”

“Uh-huh,” Billy said. “Sounds great. Lot of guys’ve done a lot of time on things that didn’t sound half as good as that does.”

“Billy,” Leo said, “I’m not a banker. I do live inna real world. I’m not a bad carpenter. I can lay brick, if there’s nobody from the union standin’ around. I can do the pipe work. I dunno how many furnaces and burners I took out and put in. I can install your hot-water heater. I can refit your fuckin’ waste disposal. You give me enough furring and wallboard, and let me get into your place in the morning, I will have the joint rebuilt before you can get through the traffic that night and there will be no plaster dust lying around all over the place. I can insulate your attic and I can make your cellar stop leaking, sometimes. I can glaze your windows where the vandals broke ’em and I can point your exterior bricks if I have time. Roofing’s something I learned about thirty years ago. I can put in dishwashers and change your locks and fix your garage-door opener. Custom bookcases and platform beds, bathroom vanities and molded showers, parquet floors and new bay windows: I do all of them things and I never once had one complaint that was legitimate. You want gold-plated faucets that look like swans? I can put those in. A little orange stove that’s shaped like an ice-cream cone. No sweat. Rewire the upstairs, put in an intercom, put a humidifier on the furnace, put in your sump pump—I done all those things.

“The trouble is,” Leo said, “doing all them things hasn’t done me enough good as far as money’s concerned, and as a result I am in a lot of trouble with a lot of bankers who don’t seem interested in my explanations.

“Now,” he said, “I was satisfied with that, and I don’t really see why I thought I hadda go out and get myself in trouble with the cops too. I didn’t need any cops chasing me around. I had enough on my plate as it was. But once they started, all of a sudden I needed a lawyer.

“Of course I can’t *get* no lawyer. None to speak of, anyway. But I can get Fein, and Fein has got the thing there that says he is a lawyer, even though the idea of Jerry Fein in court is something that’d gag a billy goat that had to go to court. But Jerry Fein has to do what I say.”

“What you ought to say,” Billy said, “you ought to say, ‘Get me somebody else.’”

“That’s what I said,” Leo said. “And that is what Jerry Fein is doing. And that is why I wanted to talk to you. I thought maybe you could use some cash.”

The truckers left the Scandinavian Pastry Shop revving their diesels on the bumpy parking lot. Billy Malatesta admitted he could use some cash.

“Billy, Billy, Billy,” Proctor said, “you could use a *lot* of cash. You had a lot of troubles.”

“I could use some cash,” Malatesta said. “Shit, I only make about twenty-one, and that’s before they start creaming everything off the top. You ever try to raise a family on what you got left after they get through taking those payroll deductions? Shit. You couldn’t raise a healthy family of goldfish on that, this day and age, let alone a sick one like I’ve got.”

“You know where that money’s going, don’t you?” Leo said.

“I know where it’s going,” Malatesta said. “I know all right. The taxes’re supporting law enforcement, public employees like me, and the old people and the nutcakes and the sick people that don’t have anybody like me standing in the living room, waiting to pay their medical bills. I’m buying food for families that the guys left when it dawned on them how much it was costing them to feed those women and those kids. I’m buying apartments for women with three kids and every single one of them’s got a different father that the kids never saw and she still won’t learn, what’s gonna happen to her if she lets them fuck her without using a rubber. I’m paying for state colleges some kid that can’t afford to go to school and probably doesn’t want to and most likely hasn’t got the brains to get anything out of it anyway, so my kids probably won’t be able to go to college because I won’t have any money to send them.”

“What they let me keep when I get the check,” he said, “the town takes out of me for lousy schools that don’t teach my kids nothing, and the supermarket gets almost all the rest except what the guy down the gas station grabs. I bought two dentists, three shoe stores, at least five Levi stores and most of the sports stuff Wilson ever made, for my kids, and my lovely wife sits there with this dumb look on her face, wondering why it is she’s always so tired and having to lie down when the old bitch knows damned right well it’s because she’s drinking a little every day. Down at the bank they probably call me ‘Ninety-day Malatesta,’ because that’s usual for how far behind I am on a mortgage. Yeah, I could use some money.”

“There ain’t a guy alive that couldn’t,” Leo said. “You show me a guy, couldn’t use some cash, I will show you, maybe, some fuckin’ goddamned Arab that has got an oil well. Except I can’t show you no Arabs on account of how I do not know too many A-rabs. Until I see one of them A-rabs and he’s riding around in the Rolls with a Caddy on a rope tied the back to ground him to the sidewalk, like the little boats they got hooked on the big boats down the Savin Hill Yacht Club there, until I see one of them motherfuckers and figure out a way that I can talk to him, I am gonna assume that every guy I meet needs cash, and the only way he’s gonna get some cash and I’m gonna get some cash is this: him and me, we gotta sit down, the two of us and figure out a way that we can get together and make some cash, and split it up.”

“I understand,” Malatesta said. “I do understand what you are saying.”

“This is good,” Proctor said. “My life’s been full, misunderstandings. My goddamned wife don’t understand me. My goddamned kid don’t understand me, the one that’s still at home.”

when he's not running off someplace. I don't understand my goddamned kid, which could have something to do with him running away three times this year already, and I am sure my goddamned kid does not understand why I keep on bringing him back. Which I don't understand myself, and I also do not see how that goddamned kid can be so goddamned stupid he can run away three times in seven months and he still can't get it right so he goes someplace where I can't find him.

"The kid is thicker'n shit, is what he is, and that is what he's got for brains. He takes after his mother. *I* am stupid, but even I could run away and make a go of it if that was what I wanted to do. I ran away when I was twenty-three, for Christ sake, and I ran away from prison, and I made it. I know it was medium security and all I hadda do was get over the barbed-wire fence inna dark without snagging my pants, but I made it and I didn't tear my pants and I was gone for fourteen months. And now I got this here kid that claims I have something to do with him being on the earth and he's unhappy about it, and I look at that great big fat woman and I know he's right but I do not fuckin' believe it.

"I do not believe it," Leo said, "because I look at her and I know I would never in my right mind fuck a goddamned Goodyear blimp like that—I would figure Don Meredith and Howard Cosell're in the broadcast booth down onna field, asking me how it's goin', onna TV. 'He's on top the fat lady now, fans, and we'll get back to the Dolphins and the Redskins here at the Orange Bowl in just a minute.' And I would never do that. But the kid says he's my kid, and furthermore, he don't *like* being my kid, it was a bad hand God dealt him, being my kid. But still he don't have the common ordinary brains, he's gonna steal a car, he doesn't park it the next day beside a hydrant with a cop standing there, but I guess he doesn't. If he does, I don't show it, because the dumb son-bitch keeps *doin'* it and things like that, so I'm inclined to think: he don't.

"That kid," Leo said, "that kid, that kid. He runs away and he ain't gone more'n six hours on his best night, which was the one I figure he was finally gone and I didn't have to worry about the little bastard anymore. So there I am, I go up his room, see what he took, and it wasn't much, and I think, 'He's nine years old. He's done it before. This time with all that experience, maybe he makes it.'

"Can you believe that, Billy?" Leo said. "Nine years, ten years ago, I must've *fucked* that woman. Here I am, pushing fifty like it was a rock up a hill, I got more troubles'n God gave the Jews, and I must've actually *fucked* that woman. I *know* I must've. No angel'd touch her no matter what They offered him. Besides, nothing came out of there could save anyone from anything. No human guy would do it because she always looked like a tractor, ever since we're married for a year. Jesus Christ, I was seventeen years old and she was sixteen years old and she had this pair of tits on her and this nice little ass and all I could think about was gettin' her clothes off and gettin' my dick in her twat and I did it. Of course she got pregnant. Of course we hadda get married. Don't know why it didn't occur to me, that was what she wanted when she took her pants off. Worked, though. Two years later and there I was married to this woman that if she was in town no hot fudge sundae was safe. When I married her she looked like a little cat, or maybe a pussy, with these brown eyes and she bleached her hair and she was really tight in the ass. Two years later she began to look like something that escaped from a fat farm, and when I got out of jail the first time, she'd found out about the Manhattan cocktails, as she calls them. The hair was brown and the back end of her looked

like something that finished last in a fifteen-hundred-dollar claiming race at Suffolk, and chewed her out for it and you know what she did? She got worse.

“Just the same,” Leo said, “I must’ve fucked her. No other human guy would touch her except some poor, fat, sorry son of a bitch that was out someplace and people were buying him drinks and he drank them and got himself so fuckin’ plastered he would screw a snake and a groundhog and a large goat if they approached him right, on account of not having had any pussy for years. And that, apparently, is what I did. Which is where that rotten little kid came from. I can’t account for the little bastard no other way.”

“Leo,” Malatesta said, “it’s no different for anybody else.”

“Don’t matter to me if it is,” Leo said. “I haven’t got time to worry about it, and I haven’t got the money to do anything about it. What I did was take my life and pour it right down the fuckin’ sewer. I will never get ahead and I know it. I got all I can do, and I’ll need a hell of a lot of luck, just to get even.

“Now,” he said, “I have got a deal for you. It is a deal which you will like. It is a deal which you will like a whole lot better’n you like the deal you got now.”

“This,” Malatesta said, “would not require a great deal of improvement.”

“WELL, TERRY, my friend,” Roscommon said to Mooney, “the reason we did not arrest anybody is because we haven’t got nobody that did anything yet, you know? And this can cause a few problems, you go around arresting people who haven’t done anything except talk, because I believe there is something in the Constitution, the United States, about how you can talk as you want. But you would of course know more about that’n I would, on account of you are the lawyer and all.”

Mooney wore a three-piece brown suit and a stern expression. He got up from behind the desk. He put his hands in his back pockets. He said, “John, John, there’s a difference between free speech and conspiracy to commit a life-endangering felony.”

“There certainly is,” Roscommon said. “I didn’t say these guys’re having a nice little conversation about how the Sox’re doing and where’re we gonna get some pitching. I saw from what my guts tell me, it sounds like Proctor is hurtin’ for money and he owns a building or three and he knows another guy who owns some property and it sounds like Malatesta is also in the hole for a buck or three. But so far that is pretty much all we know.

“Now, Terry, my friend,” Roscommon said, “you being an officer of the court and all, what with your obligations about bringing cases that you can only win ...”

“I’ve lost a couple,” Mooney said.

“Your modesty’s becoming,” Roscommon said, “although I must say it probably wouldn’t be necessary if you followed some good advice I understand you got in the course of the cases being considered before they got indicted and you had to take them in because of course they wouldn’t plead. I wouldn’t’ve pleaded either, to those dogs.

“Anyway,” Roscommon said, “would you really like to charge a couple of guys with discussing their money problems in a coffee shop? Did they make that a felony too? Because if they didn’t, you’re gonna have some trouble, I think, on account of that is all we’ve got right now.”

“Lieutenant,” Mooney said, “we know damned right well what they’re talking about. They’re talking about how one guy is going to set a fire in a dwelling place and the other guy is gonna screw up the investigation on purpose, and if we don’t do something, somebody may be killed.”

“We know it,” Roscommon said. “The trouble is, we don’t know *which* dwelling place, so we can’t prove that. They haven’t set any fire, so we can’t prove that.”

“There’s always conspiracy,” Mooney said.

“There’ll always be an Ireland, too,” Roscommon said, “and if we bring a conspiracy on what we’ve got, that’s where we both better head. Only I’ll have my pension and you’re still young yet. You’ll have to go to actual work, out catchin’ the fish in the dories and cuttin’ the peat in the bogs with your teeth all turnin’ black and the wife wearin’ her shawl by the fireside, croonin’ lullabies to the babes, bless ’em, and offerin’ the good Father a nice cup of tea. We haven’t got an overt act, Terrence me boyo. They haven’t bought a can of gas and they haven’t struck a match. They haven’t even got close to the place where they got in mind

to do the dirty deed. They may be snakes and dirty lizards, but they ain't bit anybody yet and we got to let them at least get close enough to reach somebody with their teeth before there's a goddamned thing we can do."

"Are these guys any good?" Mooney said.

"Any good?" Roscommon said. "Of course they're no good. Proctor I put in jail myself when I was about your age. And Malatesta's a disgrace to the badge. No question about that."

"No, no," Mooney said, "not them. The guys on the case. What's-their-names."

"Sweeney and Carbone, you mean," Roscommon said. "Well, I'll let you judge for yourself."

"Sweeney," Roscommon said, "you remember that little pisspot named Leonard James that they called *Jesse* and some starry-eyed liberal jerk let him out of Walpole on three armed robbery charges because he had reformed himself and he was ready to be transferred to Norfolk for prerelease, and he got out of there one fine dark night and went off on a spree that four guys got killed in? Run a cruiser off the road in Braintree one night when he was drivin' a stolen car and then shot a cop in Plymouth that was blocking the road and he went into the swamp? Well, Sweeney got him out the swamp, and he was armed, too."

"We haven't anybody in a swamp in this case," Mooney said. "I don't doubt he's brave. What I want to know is if he's smart."

"Lemme finish," Roscommon said. "Carbone. Carbone, when we started havin' all the trouble down the North End there with the young guineas leaping around and shootin' everybody every so often—I tell you, I keep hearin' there's no crime in the North End and there're times when it just about makes me sick to my stomach—and we sent him down there undercover and he brought in four of them."

"That sounds a little better," Mooney said.

"You're a real expert on this stuff, aren't you, Terrence," Roscommon said. "Lemme tell you something else—it takes more'n a pair of balls to get a man out of a swamp in the dark when he's armed and you don't know where he is and you're pretty much alone, all right. You haven't got any brains, that guy is liable, jump out a tree on your head, you know."

"They're all right then, you think," Mooney said.

"They will be," Roscommon said, "you can just keep your dick in your pants until we get these guys set up for you to fuck them. You come jumpin' in now with your bowels in an uproar, the case is blown and the day is not far off that you'll regret it."

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