

# **A Crowded Funeral**

David Moynihan

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# A Crowded Funeral

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*For Tom Nugent*

## *One*

You can tell it's important by the number of rings. Four licks and a hangup means computerized, somebody trying to get money from you, either what you owe or what they want you to owe. The line rang more than eight times at least twice that dazed afternoon, in excess of what even family would do if somebody'd died.

"Gaston."

"Oh my God, it's really you?"

"Too early to get philosophical. You are?"

"Mr. Gaston, you don't know me..."

"Jed."

"Right. Anyway, you don't know me, but I'd heard you would be the perfect one..."

"My rates for medical transcription on short notice are buck-fifty a page. Two-fifty if the intoner is a non-native speaker."

"No, Mr. Gaston, it's not about that. You still freelance, don't you?"

"Call myself one in bars. Guess I still do it."

"Yes. Wonderful. I have a story for you."

"I'm not going to Vegas."

"Why would you -- oh no. I don't see any reason for you to go to Nevada, Mr. Gaston."

"All the conventions are there. Some people like it. Some don't. I don't gamble that much. Don't like it."

"No, Mr. Gaston. This job is in Baltimore. "

"Hon."

"What?"

"The job's in Baltimore, hon. Where are you?"

"Baltimore."

"Absorbed a lot of the local culture, haven't you? What exactly do you do?"

"I work as a section editor, did they call it 'metro' when you were here?"

"Not to its face. Have you people laid off the entire staff? I know the cost-cutting and using news services thing was getting out of hand, but that's a little ridiculous, even for your parent corporation."

"We have over 500 employees, Mr. Gaston."

"Great. What do you want me for?"

"I'd been told you used to live in Union Square?"

"Nobody calls it that."

"What do you call it?"

"Hollins Market. Little Lithuania. Pigtown, with better luck. Sowebo. Anything else you could mumble your way through and explain to a cabbie when drunk. They finally torch the whole place? Need some remembrances?"

"No, it's still alive and well."

"Really? They'd ripped up Dash Hammett's old house to make room for a ManorCare. Closed the Mencken dive on lack of funds. Figure Russ Baker's abode will soon be a mini-mall. Poe's place is still in a war zone. Can't be going that good. Still got to ask, what do you need me for? I've crossed the line. Live south. You know, Potomac River, Civil War, Mason-Dixon, cigarettes under 2 bucks a pack? Got to have somebody closer."

"But it's a story no one here seems to quite understand, Mr. Gaston. And we've already had difficulty getting people to talk to us."

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"Ask nicely."

"We've done that. It's something special."

"And that is."

"There's been a murder."

"That's stunning. Hold on. I'm going to need a moment for recovery."

I left the receiver off the cradle, lit a Camel, wished I possessed a small mammal to amuse me in these trying times. Just when you start to get interested, turns out the person on the other end is absolutely stupid.

"A murder."

"Yes."

"In Sowebo."

"That's the place. Yes."

"They have 50 or so of them every year there, you know? Pretty ordinary."

"Right."

"Who was it?"

"Someone. Name of Fontana. You know him?"

"Not really. Might recognize the face. He get messed up?"

"He's dead."

"Yeah. But how?"

"They found him outside his apartment, off of Baltimore St."

"White or black?"

"White."

"Well, explains the story interest."

"I didn't quite understand that."

"You will if you ever want to move up. And what's so special about him? Rich parents? Trying to set up a party house with cheap rent? Or was he a DJ Jazzy Trevor?"

"A DJ what?"

"A wannabee? You know, white kid waits for the parents' SUV to pull up in the driveway, walks into the house with a guy he met downtown, guy is of African descent, so the kid says something like 'yo mama, Jamal and me, we tight.' Then they take the truck, drive out to some booze shop, score a couple of 40s, talk about how bad they are -- wait, that's not quite right. The white guy talks about how bad he is. The black guy sits there amused, as long as somebody else is paying for the beer. Then I guess he got capped."

"No, it wasn't like that. There seems to be something authentic about him."

"He didn't rap, did he?"

"No idea."

"Wonderful. And the authentic thing is?"

"So far more than 2,000 people have paid respects to his body. More coming every hour."

"2,000 people."

"Yes."

"And y'all couldn't get one decent interview."

"Everyone says they liked him. No one says why."

"Bring it up with the next focus group: credibility among city residents."

"Three articles. We'll pay you some upfront. Plus travel, if you have a lead, or know where he came from."

"I'm so tantalized. Gimme 50 cents a word."

"Um."

"Or I can add greatly to my already vast store of knowledge in the field of proctology and urology. Getting to the point where I can turn myself into a failed med student instead."

"OK."

"And... might want you to cover housing in the area."

"Of course."

"Well, agreed. Where's the body?"

"Arlington St. By the market. Know the place?"

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"Yeah. Got drunk there a few times."

"We won't be paying you for that, Mr. Gaston."

"Don't worry. I'll throw it in free."

"You've had a problem with that in the past. Or don't you remember?"

"Yeah. But of course I never drank as much as I thought I did. Besides, it wasn't 'cause of that I left when the night shift closed."

"Really. What was it then?"

"They offered me your job with the day crowd. Had too much respect for myself to take it. Glad to see you're not suffering under any such handicaps."

Pause.

"Mr. Gaston, I have a degree in journalism..."

"How many internships?"

"What?"

"How many internships did you do?"

"Three."

"Yeah. Ever hear of the six-interview paradigm?"

"The six-interview..."

"Uh-huh. For any job, there's a maximum number of interviews. One interview, that's so you check the person out. Second interview, that's so, if it's up in the air, you can debate about salary. Six interviews, you know what those are meant to find?"

"No. What?"

"Someone who'll sit through six interviews. Or three internships. You've made my day, babe."

"Because I've given you a job?"

"No. Because I now know somebody's life is worse than mine. What's your name?"

"Janice."

"OK, Janice. I'll call you. Have some money ready. I'll be at the site in an hour. How long's the body supposed to stay?"

"One more day. But then, they've been saying that a while."

"Sure. I believe it. I'll hurry. Thank God it's not late summer."

"Why? Dangerous area?"

"No honey. Body. Summer. Baltimore. No AC. Heat. Smell."

Another pause.

"Maybe you'll learn about that in grad school."

"Maybe."

So touchy. At least she didn't mind being called 'honey.' Sometimes you want to slap yourself and shriek "where, where do they get them?," but then you realize they're everywhere, and the only thing you can do is purchase the most time-intensive computer games, hopefully at a substantial discount.

I ate a lingering breakfast, gassed up the car, made it to the site two hours after I said I would. Wasn't any hurry; guy'd been dead for a while.

..

### *Two*

Nothing prepared me for the masses. Bodies packed tight like an Asian subway. It was one of those dive bars with too much ambition. I'd lived in the area back when it was a restaurant. Kept hearing stories about cook's feet tumbling down through the floor. Thought those stories were funny, 'til you considered what might be coming up those same holes; the line "rodents the size of aardvarks" has never been formally attributed, but as a descriptor it quickly caught on.

These days the dive, Gypsy's, it was called, not much visible on the windows save dust in mass quantity, had pretty much given up on the food thing. Tables and chairs had been removed to make way for six strategically placed draw poker machines. No doubt they paid out, but in an unusual gesture of tact, for that region at least, the bells and whistles had been turned off.

Nearly impossible to move, so I wedged myself next to a fireplace and settled in for people watching.

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Everyone was there. In that whole town, anyone who wasn't anyone was either in the building or mewing outside in the courtyard. They'd used to hold an arts festival, maybe still did, where you'd get a crowd, otherwise the neighborhood lay dead save for public assistance Fridays.

Fontana lay some distance from me, all I could see was the box and the line of respect-payers. Part of me was about to gasp that the place couldn't even support a funeral home anymore when an old lady nearby mentioned that he'd wanted it in a place like this, and she was quite happy to oblige. As she continued detailing the extent of her sacrifice, pausing momentarily to provide change for one of her barmaids, I realized I knew her.

"Joan?"

"Gaston? Oh my goodness. I'd never thought I'd see you again. Now you just wait right here a moment.

Committed to my first tale-teller, I sat musing over the concept of urgent delay, noted with amazement how the peculiar dexterity of Joan's voluminous hips, clothed in a garish wrap skirt, enabled her to swerve and duck obstacles in a way younger lasses never could. Somebody was testing out a microphone, though, and as more folks made their way in, I wondered if she could get back to me.

"And to think..." microphone wasn't quite working. Figured I ought to take notes.

"And to think the folks at Hammer's turned down the boy. Said he could never pack a big club."

Drew some laughter, little of what you might call release applause. The speaker was lean, some kind of goatee, artwork on both arms, too far away to tell what was pierced.

"Guess we all knew the boy, right? Hope you were friends. Tough luck if he owed ya money."

Laughter.

"Just kidding. Show of hands, get 'em up if you owed something to him."

Lot of hands. Serious amount of hands. Guy touched people. Understood that. Heck, I owed him the next month's rent. So I put my hand up too. Ya learn to fit in.

"Now y'all know ole Jack, he can't be staying 'round here much longer. It's been cool and all, but the boy's been here three days. Besides, all kinds of folks showing up here, sooner or later the police might remember people actually live here, this far away from the water, and nobody wants that..."

Laughter.

"But I wanted to start out, we've gotten some cards for Jack, some phone calls coming in, amazing how many people have heard about something you don't hear about outside. So we're going to read off some messages, things we pulled off the 'Net. Who's first? Amy, come up..."

Joan had rejoined me.

"This guy, Fontana, he had a webpage? I'd need to look that up."

"No, Gaston. My, you're all business. Haven't seen you in ages, you never called, you didn't write, don't you care about us?"

"Joan, it was time to go, I'd had it here..."

"I know you did. I know that about you. Why you're here now. They needed you back."

"Yeah. Somebody who can spend time on it, but not have the clout if they doctor it up. They will doctor it up, of course."

"Some people, Gaston. You know you're never going to see the last of them. You just know they're coming back."

"Maybe explains why all those women were just friends with me."

"Maybe."

"Or maybe it was the game... them hitting me with everything, feigning disinterest, while trying to figure out if it was worth it, me acting the good listener while trying to hide the fact that I wasn't paying attention..."

"I missed you. Why'd you have to go?"

"One of those things, all the bars closed around here, 'cept yours. Right?"

"Yes. We both know that."

"Right. So once I left yours, only choices I'd have would be behind plexiglass, right?"

"Mm-hmm."

"So me drinking behind plexiglass, nothing but American, and most products out of St. Louis would have hit the crowd as too yuppie."

"Yes."

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"Sooner or later, I'd have ended up snorting something, Joan. Might be coke, might be heroin, might just be a wicked blend of rat poison somebody told me about, but I'd end up snorting something. I like my nostrils."

"Yes. I see. But it's lonely here without everybody."

"Lonelier now."

"Yes. That it is. It's been good for business. And let me tell you, the business could really use it. I'm brick rich..."

"But cash poor?"

"You do remember. Right. Forgot that about you. They still won't let us have concerts here."

"You heard him play?"

"A few times. He was very good, you know."

"He write lyrics?"

"Not that I know of. Wasn't much of a singer that I can recall."

"So what did he play? Bass, lead, drums? Always figured, if there was anybody who'd get a crowd, have to have more personality than that one drummer who used to work for you."

"Rob you mean? He's long gone."

"Rob. Still eat glass?"

"He said he'd given that up. It was a part of his charm, wasn't it?"

"That and the questions he'd ask you."

"I'd forgotten his questions, they were... unique."

"Would you make love to female celebrity X, if she had the head of male celebrity Y?"

"Oh yes. That was... Rob."

"But we're not here for him. Fontana like that?"

"Well, he could be funny, yes?"

"Easy-going, accessible guy?"

"He was like — there was this boy grew up around here. Always had his head in a book. Know the type?"

"Vaguely."

"And the boy was driven, kept finding knowledge, and searching, he was a joy for us to watch. Fontana was like that, I think. Only he was better than that other boy. He could relate to people. He made them feel... easy. Does that help you any?"

"I think so. Made them feel easy. I can deal with that. Yeah. Joan, it does help."

"But of course, I didn't know him all that well. Knew more about him, really. You'll find better friends of his here. Even Porky knew him better than me. You really ought to talk to him. But come and see me again."

This was something of an admission. Joan was one of those people who prided herself on knowing everything about everything, or at least saying she did. Porky was a neighborhood type, been around for more than 60 years, still went by the nickname he'd earned when he got caught in the mule barn, as a teenager, engaging in recreational bestiality. Either the years or the crowd had made Joan mostly honest.

"OK. Last thing, who was the speaker?"

"Him. Oh, his name's Branson. Lou Branson. He and Fontana were friends, I guess. Don't know him at all."

"But he's leading it?"

"Yeah. He's a real funny guy. Tells great stories."

"Thanks Joan."

"Don't mention it."

### *Three*

Thought I'd have to make an appointment with the head mourner, but as it happened, Branson came to me before I could even grab a beer.

"You the one covering this?"

"Yeah, name's Gaston. You know him?"

"Partly. Mostly I came for the food."

"Funny. How'd you know him?"

"I run things at the clubs here. You meet folks."

"He ever play for you?"

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"Sometimes. Not the same scene."

"Scene. How much do whippets go for now?"

"Five bucks, same as usual. Good business to be in."

"What was Fontana in?"

"Everything, pretty much. Went back and forth. Didn't stick with things too long."

"So were you and him gonna team up?"

"Guy played everything. I'd pitch him stuff."

"Like what?"

"Well, we're getting old now, see. You know, 28, 29, whatever. Market's not going for that anymore. You want to make the big bucks, you gotta do what the kids are into."

"Yeah. What was the scam?"

"Depended on how wasted we got. Our big thing though, man, was this... we take five kids, 14, 15, have 'em sing real high, but Fontana, maybe a friend or two, they make the music halfway decent. Talking posters, deodorant ads, you name it. Telling you, it would be huge."

"Have to ask, name for the band was gonna be?"

"So Sweet."

"You'll spare me the lyrics?"

"Long as you spell my name right."

"Funny."

"Hey, you're in the business, I'm in the business."

"Dig that. So, you know how things work, right, who do I say killed him?"

"Inner-city male?"

"Can't get away with that... anymore."

"How's about sexually frustrated little white guy with a ton of unresolved anger?"

"Depends, was he wearing gothic clothing? Listening to bands where I can at least suggest Satanic overtones?"

"Black clothing, you mean?"

"Could work. Nah, been done."

"Right. Hmm, this one'll take some time. Let me think. I've got it, you make up a serial killer. The West Side Moat Monster. Yeah, somebody who's going around wasting people, insisting that they put a big canal or river around here."

"Because?"

"Because in this town, if you ain't on the water, nobody cares about you. All you get is some kind of asshole from elsewhere, come in, five minutes later leave, not give a flying fuck once the cameras are off."

"Yeah."

"Hate people like that."

"They do kind of get on your nerves, don't they."

"They do. That they do."

"So, the real story, what do you go by?"

"Lou."

"No handle?"

"Even my rap sheet just has me Lou."

"That's different."

"Hey, it's how it goes."

"So did you ever play with him?"

"Jumping off swings at the park."

"I meant, like, musically, just jamming on the sides. People around here, as I remember, would mix up every now and again, musician-swapping, guy does three-chord punk, but every Sunday he's hitting jazz with five old guys, and they've got a decent sound too."

"OK. Yeah. Sometimes. Never worked like that. Fontana was in this one band, couple years ago, they pretty much had it made. Probably know the name."

"Take off on masturbation, right?"

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"Yeah. Doesn't narrow it down much. But they were just about there. 'Til the heroin."

"Fontana?"

"No never — Won't say never."

"I didn't think he'd make a good posthumous milk ad."

"Yeah, but he was below average. Wouldn't call him opposed to trying stuff though."

"Women?"

"Lots. Maybe one serious. He was off and on with her. Ain't seen her around, but we didn't get along so good, me and her."

"And you knew Fontana, honest, since when?"

"Since forever. But lots of people knew him. Didn't like him at first. Guy was too above it."

"Right. Can you show me where he lived sometime?"

"Like right now?"

"Don't you have stuff to do here?"

"It can wait. They're trying to get rid of us, clear the group out. If I split now, don't got to clean nothing up."

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Got my stuff. It's cool."

"What about the body?"

"Oh, yeah. He wouldn't mind. They're coming to get him soon. Plot reserved in Greenmount. I'm not in charge of that."

"Pallbearer?"

"Carried him in. Carried his show for him. He can find his own way now."

"Good enough."

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### *Four*

We took Branson's car, an obvious babe magnet cunningly disguised as a 1974 Buick Opel, 0–25 in three minutes, unless and until the grade shifted down. My body nestled into a decent mixture of torn vinyl and shredded foam, I got the drive-by version of Fontana's life.

In a nutshell it was lotto, plexiglass, lake trout and checks cashed. But it spanned half a city. Fontana's studio, padlocked, lay some eight blocks from the apartment where the Duchess of Windsor stayed after her dad died. His apartment lay in a historic hotel, abandoned by the owners upon recognition of an ungodly repair bill. His last job, cashiering a liquor store, overlooked the Sandtowne statue of Billie Holiday.

"Got around."

"Yeah."

Branson took me to Fontana's club, or at least, the place where he played when he wanted to charge money. Top of a warehouse, surrounded by signs in the Korean alphabet, couple blocks beyond the train station. Here and there on the ground were little tributes, hand-made posters of Fontana, not playing, just hanging out, steel eyes, cut jaw.

Someone had made a sculpture, too abstract or childlike for me to make much of it, and a couple of enterprising types had snatched flowers from a less neglected part of the city. Never anyone with him, just Fontana alone.

We got out to wander around, Branson had the key to this one. "How many did he draw?"

"Depends on who he was playing with."

"Thought Fontana was a big draw."

"Hell yeah. The biggest. But he never advertized it. Guy was the stealth celebrity, if you get it."

"Hard time explaining that one."

"Right. But here's the thing, he could get anybody to play with him. Anybody at all. Local legend, sure, but it went beyond himself. Ever know anyone like that?"

Sounded like a test, or maybe Branson didn't get around much.

"Sure, every year for a while, had this big party where I went to college. Guy named Al, came down from PA. Called it Alfest. Huge deal. Music, drugs, whatever."

"Alfest, what was it about?"

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"Don't know, maybe it was seasonal. He came in, 'round the same time every year, like the swallows going to Capistrano or something. Not sure. Pretty good reason to get wasted."

"So this guy, Al, he played music?"

"Yeah, guitar. Rock stuff. Years before Seattle."

"OK, so what was famous about him."

"He used to hang out with this band sometimes. Local bunch. Hair rock. Lead singer looked pretty good. 'Bout all you could say about them."

"And, what was so big about them?"

"Well, they were going to L.A., right? Going to make it big. Got to be more than just bullshit with them, though. These guys sold all the shit they could, put money together, got ready for the trip. And they wanted to take Al with them."

"Al didn't go."

"Nope. He thought they sucked. Sucked bad. OK to hang with, but not even in the top twenty as far as his town went."

"OK. Then what?"

"The band split. Got a decent guitarist, dude had as much hair as they did. Hooked up with the right agent, got somebody interested in how they looked on the tube, couple of record deals, big money, famous name. Haven't heard from 'em since. But anyway, that was the guy's credibility. He didn't hang with them. Everybody dug it."

"So you think he played OK?"

"Don't know. I went two years in a row, but I was too wasted. Besides, back in the day, I paid my rent washing dishes for the band, whenever they split. Didn't go to the show. Happens."

"You missed out."

"Probably. On the other hand, every now and again one waitress would take pity on me and invite me home. Usually because her in the band boyfriend was out competing, trying to see who could put up the most numbers."

"Who won? Bass guitar or drummer?"

"Drummer. Most of the bass guitar guys I met were wankers."

"Wrecking the stereotype, man. OK, but if you've seen so much," Branson opened the door, "let me ask you the last time you saw something like this."

It was the foyer, if you can call it that, to Fontana's space. Rusty metal staircase led two flights up, there didn't seem to be anything at the first landing. A wall blocked off most of the ground area. Remaining space was packed with tributes, homemade wreaths of anything from guitar strings to beer cans, carvings, letters, cards, like when royalty dies, only this time people had something to say. Found it moving.

"It all got dropped off here?"

"Pretty much. Me and a friend moved it inside last night, looked like it was gonna rain. Didn't want nothing getting messed up."

"Must've weighed a lot."

"He didn't know anybody into junk sculpture. I hope. Or maybe the junk sculptors have more class. Hope so. Wouldn't want to get tetanus or nothing."

"Yeah. What are you gonna do with it all?"

"One thing at a time. Moved it in here for now. They won't let us drop any of it off at Greenmount. Not even the little stuff. Orderly place to die. Boy'd probably like it there, though. Famous folk."

"Next to the Booth family?"

"Or something."

"Or something. Been rough?"

"Not as rough as it was on him. Getting used to seeing people die. Happens to all the good clubbers sooner or later."

"So, what do you think happened?"

"Fontana was walking where he shouldn't have been, like he has for the past 10, 12 years, ran into some punk from out of town he didn't know, or better, didn't know him, something goes wrong, guy's hyped, Fontana got shot. I spend three days not sleeping. Everybody comes to visit. In a couple weeks, gonna have a big horse race. Everybody can go to that, get drunk there instead."

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"That's cynical. Supposed to be my department."

"Yeah, but you were the only honest one there."

"Why's that?"

"Everybody else said they knew him. Most of 'em didn't know him any better than you."

"Seems to have touched folks."

"Oh yeah. He was Mr. AT&T of South Fucking Baltimore. Reached out and got everybody. After he was dead."

"Human nature, Lou. People only got weepy over Ma Bell after the breakup. Before that, just made fun of the ugly phones."

"Yeah. So what you gonna do?"

"Can we take a look upstairs?"

"Sure. Nothing to it."

### *Five*

Nightclubs will never pass for contemporary shrines to the God Dionysus, least not in the noon hours, when daylight seeps through shattered windowpanes, revealing a floor carpeted in cigarette butts, discarded plastic cups, and the odd fold-out of self-published lyrics from a truly desperate poet.

Still, the design wasn't bad, found myself recalling disco fantasies until I noticed the absence of the revolving glass ball.

"Bring any girls up here?"

"What else a place like this for? But you bring girls anywhere, don't you?"

"Me? Nah. Been trying to observe the spirit of National Masturbation Day on a year-round basis, though of course that's gotten corporate, so it might be time to date again."

"Yeah. Well, this is it. Where legends are made. Every night some little sorority girl come in, see the wild side, wouldn't believe the number of wannabe eight-balls."

"Eight-balls?"

"Banged in every corner."

"Got ya. Sorority girl, though, place like this has more of an attraction for the younger set, right?"

"Yeah. But my lawyer told me not to say nothing while trial was still pending."

"OK. So how many dates Fontana play here?"

"Dozens."

"Biggest celeb ever to walk through?"

"What? Media people? They're not the ones who mattered."

"Figured that, but I'm working for the mainstream press here. Somebody important must a done a couple 'a lines 'round here."

"Yeah. Probably. Let's check the keg. See if they left a card."

We strolled through the debris, past walls of indiscriminate art. Some of the paintings had a phosphorous tint, making me think there'd be more to see if I was willing to risk the neighborhood at night. I thought about it, but I've been busy living, and they weren't paying that much.

"There gonna be a show for him?"

"Yeah. Oh yeah. Guy took a bad time to die on us though."

"Why's that?"

"He was supposed to be in charge of the cleanup."

"So this is the last place he played?"

"Last time seen alive. Big crowd. All the kids dancing, dancing, even when my man played something he wanted them to listen to, they were still dancing."

"Ecstasy and culture don't mix?"

"So they say."

"They weren't doing crystal meth, were they?"

"That speed shit. Hell no."

"Cool. I hate talking to people on crystal meth."

"Yeah, you won't have that problem. Don't think."

"OK. So who was with him on stage the last night?"

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"Same band that was playing today. Pretty much."

"They played with him before?"

"Off and on. Fontana was what you might call between bands, down at the unemployment office. Only he was permanently between them -- that was a joke at the time."

"Right. Pretty funny one."

"Yeah. So this is it. Got a picture of his world yet?"

"Yeah. Great."

"Nothing special about it, is there?"

"Attracted a crowd."

"That he did."

"But you don't know why."

"And you haven't really explained it to me."

"Maybe it's something you can't explain."

"You've spent a few days trying. That's why the big thing for the group, right, aiming to tell them about the man?"

"I missed."

"Got another shot. Put it in a few words, or do it long and drawn out. What made him special? Good looks? Dazzling skill with women? Guitar licks straight out of hell? Kicking outside jumper? What did it?"

"You ever play, or at least watch, baseball? Like, know it?"

"Well, apart from the fact that Brooks Robinson had more gold gloves than anybody save Jim Kaat, Lou Gerhig would've hit five home runs in a game once if it hadn't been for a great catch at the wall, and that there's one guy in the Hall of Fame who ain't much more qualified to be there than his minor-league reject potato-throwing grandnephew, not a whole hell of a lot."

"OK. So you know how Johnny Bench, got pissed off at this pitcher, some loser in love with his fastball, but his fastball wasn't no good?"

"Yeah. Heard the story."

"Bench catches the guy's fastball, with his bare hand, just to prove it wasn't a whole heck of a lot?"

"Right. Got it."

"And the guy, like, the pitcher guy, he was just stunned, he makes this little sign on his chest, got nothing to say, just, that was a cool thing you did, here's my sign. I am in awe of you."

"Yeah. Yeah. Got it."

"That's how Fontana was. You saw him, you wanted to mess with him a little. Just, like he got something too smug about him. Everybody, wanted to take him down a bit."

"And."

"And he'd never show it. Or almost never. You just weren't gonna get to him. I never saw him lose it. Never. It's like he was always here, always just a little out of place. Guy had skills. Could've used any of it."

"So he was a coward. Afraid of the attention?"

"Nope. Man, wasn't that. Wasn't afraid at all. You messed with him too much, you know, he'd get you. He'd reach out and catch your fastball. And that was it."

"How'd he get you?"

"That's another story for another day."

"Keep me coming back."

"Yeah, telling you the story like that chick, one where the guy was killing all the other women for fucking around, so she got in there and told him the story, so he had to keep her alive."

"Scheherazade."

"Yeah. Sche-whatever the fuck you said."

"Great. So that's what I got to ask people, how he got to them?"

"Beats knowing what covers he did."

"OK. Where do I find those band members, I'll need to scope 'em out alone."

"Alone, they might not talk to you."

"Leave that to me."

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"Yeah. All right. You need more than just my side. Right. OK."

"So where do I find them?"

"I'll draw you a map, which road to take and who to have watch your car. Just kidding. It's easy enough. Place you want to start is a club south of the water, one stuck full of dead animals."

"Keeping with the season."

"Yeah. Goth band. Don't know what the boy was doing sometimes."

"Right. And his girl?"

"She used to waitress in a coffee house off the point. Don't know if she's still there or not. But if she's not, there'll be folks who can tell you."

"Cool. You'll give me a ride back?"

"Long as the car starts."

"OK. I've got to call my editor, can we take off after that?"

"Lucky you."

### *Six*

Fontana's phone had been coopted for a spontaneous exhibition of performance art, or at least that's one explanation for why the receiver lay on both sides of the dance floor, so I went outside to use the payphone.

Dedicated as she was to both her craft and her reporter, Janice had left the office for a Tai-Bo class. Waiting on hold for someone to check in with, I was accosted by two crack dealers, four panhandlers, and one guy who told me the medical school was a front for a sophisticated drug experiment being conducted on the city's water by Seventh Day Adventists, as if I didn't already know.

Eventually I gave up, told the receptionist I'd check in again later, grabbed a lift with Branson, and headed out to catch a band.

### *Seven*

The week's tough question: if a bunch of black-wearing white face paint kids are really depressed about something, how can you tell? A bunch of them were out on the floor dancing with whoever, chatting each up other up about whatever, and agreeing that the reporter on the floor didn't matter whatsoever.

There were stuffed animal heads all over the joint, giving the room the feel of an Alaskan hunting lodge, if all you could hunt in Alaska was mid-Atlantic deer in great quantity. I was starting to get depressed, and the music was not to my taste, same tunes over and over again, played from a couple of decent quality but hardly pro level discs. I was starting to catch the same lyrics when I became glad I'd never used the "momma didn't raise no dummies" cliché in my life; I'd have been a hypocrite bar none.

I sat down on a stool near the bar, my alcohol-enabled wrist band getting me an odd look from the bartender when I asked for another water, and just listened for the boy.

Minutes passed, my silent presence turned angry stares into neutral, even approving glances, like the reception given a new dog on the corner who it turns out doesn't bite or even bark much.

I don't have enough of the frustrated novelist in me to ever try my hand as a music critic, and wouldn't dream of calling myself a Goth enthusiast, but if I can explain, I'd have to say there was an energy there, chords mixed together like the songsmith gave a damn, which is perhaps more than we can say for other industry figures, in just about any genre you choose.

Like any other band, some songs were favorites, emptying the side-booths and clearing the walls of ivy and other plantlife, while others sprouted weeds, giving up the floor to a relatively small number of the faithful. On one of the more popular hits, I asked the bartender if he thought he knew how it must have been for DJs on the night Colbain died.

"Nirvana? I liked them too," was all he said. In the lights I was struck by how old he looked. Must have been at least 60.

Typical Baltimore. Non-committal. Journey to the heart of I guess. Heard a story once, guy got assigned to visit every single bar on Eastern Ave., from Little Italy, past Fells Point, through Greektown, out to the steel yards, remembered the reporter talking about how hard it was to pull a quote from some people. In this one place he got so pressed, nearly dying, finally someone let him in on a story where one 20-year regular got so irritated at dangling earwax, he took a Q-tip to another 20-year regular.

There were no 20-year regulars in this place, only a couple of twenty-somethings scattered among the teens. I

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tried again on his next pass.

"Fontana really must have meant something to folks."

"Yes. It's been pretty hard on them."

"Has anything happened here?"

"The usual. Tell you the truth, I've got a girl stationed in the bathroom, just watching out, making sure nobody's in a stall alone. We do that anyway, but now we're more worried about them hurting themselves on premises. She's been watching."

Paradise. "What's her name? She still on duty?"

"Don't be going in the ladies restroom now."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Though of course all bathrooms are unisex in bars. "I've got to tell you something."

"What's that. Wait. Hold on a minute." He walked away, talked to a customer, poured three drinks, gave a few instructions.

"I've been assigned to cover this story. For the paper. They know he's touched a lot of people."

"Yeah. I know."

"You know."

"Everyone knows."

"But I don't know everyone. How'd they hear?"

"You're about the fourth one come in here. The other ones had photographers."

"And people just won't talk to them."

"Mr. Fontana didn't like publicity."

"He ever play here?"

"I've told this before."

"Yeah. OK. But who's stayed the longest?"

"Of all of them?"

"Yeah."

"You have."

"I've only been here an hour. Maybe."

"You've stayed longer than any two of them."

"Are you impressed by that?"

"Naw. Just figured you didn't have anywhere to go. Another water?"

"Yeah. Easy on the ice this time."

"That's funny."

"They're pretty desperate at the paper."

"Oh, I expect they're doing OK."

"You read it?"

"Sometimes. Got the sports section from a couple of great games. I liked the night one."

"Yeah, me too."

"Really."

"I used to work for the night one. They only called me because I lived in the area where Fontana's body was kept. Guess they thought I might know something."

"Well, at least they're trying."

"It's a story worth telling."

"That it is. That it is."

"So, can you give me anything, did he play here?"

"No. Not here. Some folks from his bands did. Not him."

"Did you like him?"

"Sure. He came and sat down here all the time. Right where you're sitting, just about. Talked to him on slow nights. Excuse me." More drinks. A lot more this time. An older crowd was arriving. Finally my friend came back.

"Forget Fontana for a second. I wouldn't have pegged you for working in this kind of place."

"Me neither. That's why it's good to meet people. "Just give 'em what they want. Everbody goes home happy. I

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sleep late. Works out."

"Yeah. Guess so. Knew some of the folks by that art college. For 20 years, they'd pour Natty Boh into the glasses of one group of students after another. Put kids through college on 25 cent tips.

"Yeah. Good jobs they had. Lots of folks came in. Tell you what, I can maybe help you out a bit. Michelle, she's my watcher, is coming out now. Can't smoke in the restroom. Bad example. That's her in the corner, heading for the door. You can catch her."

"Thanks."

"Oh, don't mention it."

"I mean it. Thanks. One more question, Fontana's band was supposed to be coming here."

"Yeah. Heard that too. Expect they'll be around. Or, you could find them around the corner. They'll wait there sometimes if they think I'm too busy or the floor's too crowded."

"And you were very busy."

"Yeah. Better catch Michelle now. Hope she can help."

### *Eight*

For those categorizing service industry professions in terms of their observational scores vis-a-vis human nature, restroom attendant would have to rank near the bottom; too much of the job centers on not watching what's going on for it to attract keen insight. Roundabout way of saying Michelle was no help whatsoever.

Giving up, I sauntered around the corner to see if I could find anyone who played with Fontana. Couple of flashing red lights and a crowd that pushed closer together for a better look with each order to disperse greeted me. Someone lay on the ground, face at half-mash from what looked like a half-clip of bullets delivered point-blank.

He was wearing black with a death-oriented T-shirt, like the name of a band. Started to look like I wasn't going to get my great interview that night.

### *Nine*

It'd been a while since I'd gone talking to cops. They're still the same, case you were wondering. Little trimmer maybe, occasionally given to '90s euphemisms when describing racially motivated searches and busts, but still given to the self-centered though betimes charming notion that whatever they were working on, be it a traffic ticket or the arrest of a serial killer, was the most important thing happening on the planet at that time, and likely for all times.

Corner bar had emptied out. Most of the folks there milling around, I sidled up to the occasional stunned-looking ones, like they'd just suffered a one-two punch. From what I gathered, they had indeed.

The deceased was named Steven Todd Bateman, age 23, graduate of Southern High School, last known address near an industrial district. That and around 28 dollars were the good contents of his jacket pockets. The bad was what appeared to be 3 marijuana cigarettes and a small quantity of narcotic, white powder, presumably heroin. Bateman had only a small supply left if he was a regular user.

Upon discovery, it was ruled a drug-related homicide. No eyewitnesses came forward, so the officers on scene described it as a case where Bateman tried to buy, didn't have enough cash, or may have had additional cash in another pocket, something went wrong, et cetera, et cetera.

Bateman was also one of the last people to have played with Fontana. Band name was Gonzo Jim Thompson, though they hadn't played together often, so it might have changed. A cursory glance at Bateman's fingers didn't reveal any calluses, so I presumed I'd find the singer.

Not wanting to be ghoulish, figuring that kids around there had enough, and of course realizing that I got paid more for each day I took on the story, I left a few cards for members of Bateman's group, asking them to page me or leave a message at the newspaper if they wanted somebody to talk to.

Both clubs shut down early that night. I went to the paper to try and check in with Janice.

### *Ten*

"All right, all right."

Not everything had gone wrong. There was still a friend behind the security desk.

"George."

"Jedediah. Jedediah. My word, haven't seen you in — how long's it been?"

"Too long."

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"Oh yes. Too long. Heard you was going overseas now."

"Nah, just across the river. State line. Guess it is kind of like another country, now that you mention it."

"Surely must be. Surely must be. What you here for?"

"They called me back. Asked me to write a story about the old neighborhood."

"Well now, that is something. Couldn't find nobody here."

"Does that surprise you, George?"

"Well, I reckon it doesn't. Reckon not. Hmm. Well, things have improved somewhat. Been some changes."

"Always are."

"Serious. You might want something from this place again. We miss you."

"Oh George. You'll get me all choked up."

"Yeah. Guess so. Things been rough sometimes. Don't nobody ever come here no more, telling me what someone on the street just offered them."

"What? They don't? My God, that's what makes it Baltimore. Dish rags, car loot, sex acts, travelling bazaar."

"Yes sir. That it is. A travelling bazaar."

"Especially when it happens in the middle of the street. Never get that anywhere else."

"No sir, Mr. Jedediah, no place like this."

"Saw this Yuppie the other day."

"And what was he selling?"

"Legal advice."

"That's good, Jedediah. That's good."

"Yup, corner of Baltimore and Calvert. Right there. Guess he'd just been downsized."

"It happens. It happens. Who you here to see?"

"Some editor. Janice."

"Her."

"Yeah."

"She don't talk to me."

"She's missing out."

"Yeah. Have to run you up there."

"She can wait."

"Well she can wait, yes. But Jedediah, something you ought to know."

"What's that?"

"She's not very good at it."

"I see. Good one."

"Yeah. I'll run you up."

"OK."

### *Eleven*

We chatted the elevator ride up, talking mostly about how the Orioles didn't have it that year, save for one outfielder who was playing with guts. George was a really nice guy, the sort of person you needed to talk to more for long-term wellbeing, but I spent the trip ridiculing myself silently, remembering how once I'd been so in love with the paper I'd tried to sneak on the newsroom floor, speaking exclusively in a foreign language so they wouldn't be able to kick me out.

Times had changed. Pretty much had to drag me here now, with promises of excessive pay.

Said goodbye to George as he ventured down to his world of 135 degree security cam sweeps and late night talk show reruns, then walked into what was very much a deserted newsroom. Janice stood at the far end near an unnaturally clean cubicle replete with plants, she was fretting.

"No one to keep you company?"

"Well, thank goodness you finally showed up. I can't believe it. You were supposed to check in with me several times today. What's wrong with you? Are you a professional? God, that's so completely irresponsible."

"Guess not. Who would want to keep you company?"

"Well, no, they've put the morning edition to bed."

"Right."

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"And you don't have a story yet."

"Guy died three, now four days ago. Hardly front page news. We'd agreed on a feature."

"Right. We did. But that doesn't mean you've got carte blanche to just walk around on your own, not telling me anything."

"Thought that was the definition of freelance. What's the matter, Janice, had a best friend in an outgoing executive? Wondering where the rent's going to come from? There's always sales. You could even combine it with a career in marketing."

"Is it a problem between you and women? Is that it? Why you can't stay on? Wake up, join the changing world. There wasn't a single male in my journalism classes who got the attention and praise of me and some of my friends."

"Well of course not, Janice. Burned-out university types, they do feel threatened, their worklife spent in a rather different atmosphere. But it's only by smart women. Someone like you, eager to please, somewhat docile, real good at taking direction, you're perfect, probably got A's in a few classes without even reading the book. Right?"

"So what?"

"Yeah. Don't need to know Spenser or any of those dead white guys anyway, right? Never mind. Point is, we both concede that men are threatened by strong women, what better antidote to that than someone like you. You're not only un-threatening, you'll stand in the way and be catty towards anyone else who is. Maybe deep down you know it, but you still get to wear the nice dresses, drive a four by four and feel empowered, right?"

"Why do you talk to me that way?"

"Cause this is a bullshit assignment, somebody ought to say it to you, if only for the waitstaff you've abused, and, frankly, I can. Your ass is on the line, ain't it, Janice?"

"Gaston, if you don't come through on this..."

"What, you'll really really not publish me? Come on, it's been two years since my byline last appeared under a Baltimore masthead. I come in here knowing more about it than you and your staff do, and I haven't worked particularly hard. What, your reporters don't cull sources anymore?"

"We have a strong investigative team."

"Yeah. Dig the foreign coverage. Or is that what you guys pick up off the wire. You had a responsibility to come through. You've sent at least three reporters down. Let me guess, when of 'em tried to dress hip, right?"

"Well, to fit in."

"Friend of mine in a band tells a story about alternative rockers in the area near Harvard Square. Early '90s, guys were showing up to see a couple of heavy into beer bands from out of town, playing two, even three chords. Said the club-goers, local students most likely, wore dyed mohawks, and at the end of the set jumped into BMWs and used Mercedes. Sound about right?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. If it was 1979. Well, except for the BMWs and Mercedes. How'd your investigator do?"

"He was assaulted."

"Cool."

"So what have you found out?"

"Aside from the second shooting?"

"Second?"

"Yeah. Happened around 12:30. Out front a bar near city end. No reporters on the scene."

"We got the story from the police."

"Police tell you Bateman played with Fontana?"

"They said it was drug-related. He had some heroin and other paraphernalia."

"Right. Shot in the face. A lot."

"What do you think it means?"

"Don't play in a band with Fontana. Bad luck."

"Right. Anything else?"

"Well, Fontana wasn't strictly clean. Used to sell nitrous balloons and such. If he's hung in that neighborhood for very long, he's probably smoked some cocaine, done other drugs. Heavy scene where he came from. Autopsy

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show traces of anything in his body?"

"Few beers the day before. Some cannabis."

"Cannabis? Hadn't heard it called that. Or do you mean marijuana?"

"That too."

"Mexican, Canadian, Tennessean?"

"Mexican — oh, I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"Wondering what I'll get when I go buy some."

"Yeah. Actually, I'll need a couple hundred from you. For expenses."

"So you can buy marijuana? Mr. Gaston, I don't think you're taking this seriously. Maybe we need to reconsider our arrangement."

"You're right. This isn't an advance, it's for expenses. We ought to draw that out somewhere, in writing. Or else you can just say it's for petty cash. Up to you."

"You think I'm going to give you money so you can come up here and buy drugs? Well, I guess you'll just have to go back to whatever it was you were doing before you came here."

"You mean contacting the weekly and writing a cover story for them?"

"The weekly?"

"Yeah, you know, thing published every Wednesday, great horoscopes, one of those semi-alternative ventures that radical chics suburbanites into downtown bondage shops, occasionally does journalism when the chain owner starts to get worried people are catching how much they much from economies of scale on gay phone sex ads. The weekly. My next stop will be them."

"Why? Why do you care?"

"Make you look bad. Definite plus. And there's one thing you don't seem to get, hon. Remember the football player, running back I believe? You still cover football here, right?"

"Yes, we do that."

"Of course you do. Anyway, the yardage guy, the one caught by police, think it was the Mexican border? Maybe Texas or something. Know what I'm talking about?"

"I remember it. Mm-hmm. He also ran into problems here."

"Yeah, the opposiing team's defensive line."

"What?"

"You don't get anything, do you?"

"What were you going to say?"

"Well, day that story happened, I was drinking in a fern bar. Happens. You know what I said to the bartender?"

"What?"

"Bartender, ain't it a shame. Just a crying shame."

"Why?"

"Streets in that town going to hell. Schools not worth a damn. Mayor one of those dweebes who went to a good knowledge, has the potential to do anything save get results. It all fell apart on crack in that town,' I said. 'But worst of all, bartender, even though most neighborhoods people won't walk out alone at night...'"

"Yes. Yes, Mr. Gaston. All right. Get to the point."

"It's Jed."

"Jed."

"Even though most neighborhoods, people won't walk out alone at night,' I said, 'you still can't get good grass in Baltimore.' Now give me money."

"Oh. OK. Yes, I will. One moment."

She went into somebody's desk. Then rummaged through her own purse. Came back with \$170.

"Here, and that's my own money too. Will it help?"

"Shouldn't hurt. You didn't strike me as the type who carries cash."

"I don't trust the stores, the banks. I read this book about ATMs. And I don' want poeple knowing what I buy."

"Well, it's good that you're doubting somebody's integrity, Janice."

"So when will I hear from you again?"

"I'll file the first story for you tomorrow. We can agree that the tenor of it has changed."

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"Yes."

"Oh and Janice, thanks for the bucks. And by the way, if it's any consolation to you, I do have something nice to say."

"That is?"

"You're nowhere near as fat as I thought you would be."

### *Twelve*

Call it a new urban geography. Boundaries within boundaries, lines not drawn but very much there. If you live downtown and walk a lot, you get a feel for where you can go, where you can go with friends, where you go when you're feeling dangerous, and where you go when you're drunk or wanting to die.

Fayette and Monroe was my destination, an intersection I'd visited previously only when my job demanded I stand behind yellow tape, looking concerned and getting the occasional interview, or else when I'd gotten so trashed on cheap stout I'd forgotten to head in the direction of skyscrapers when staggering home. It happens.

I cruised the block a few times, made a mental note to remember what the prostitutes were wearing just in case it showed up some months hence on a fashion show runway, then parked a short distance away to see if anyway I knew showed up.

Call me out of practice. Three of the neighborhood's lowest surrounded my car, the in back on a projectile line to my throat, his hand at a jacket bulge, likely a Tech 9, the one next to me rapping on the window mouthing out "you a cop?," and over by the passenger side, looking in charge and angry, was a guy wondering what he could take the suburbanite for.

I rolled the window down slow.

"No, not a cop. I'm a reporter."

Got a rush of laughter from the galley.

"Seriously."

Passenger door looked me over. "Strange time to be reporting, G."

"Yeah. But I've gotten the impression folks around here work nights. Ever come by in the morning and knock loud on the door of a man who works nights? Good way to get shot."

Not amused. "So's fucking with me."

"Believe it. Got a few questions about a guy. Two guys, actually. One killed in three–four days ago, other one three–four hours ago. Any of you folks know anything about it?"

"What? Some white boy gets shot?" This was driver's side. Oh yeah, we gets all choked up over it."

"Hey, shut up." Passenger door. "I'm listening."

"Just curious. Fontana, his body got kept over at the Gypsy. For about a week or so. He's shot. His friend gets shot. His friend's carrying. They've both been hanging out together. Cops found some drugs on Fontana. You know him, right?"

"Seen him around?"

"What I look like? Fucking Mr. 411? You see dial buttons on my ass?" This was passenger door. To the cacophony of driver's side and hatchback.

"I'm just wondering if either of them, Bateman was the other one, white dude..."

"Yeah, that narrows it down."

"I got ya. I got ya. But Fontana lived up the street from here. And he was probably into the soft stuff. I need to know if he was into the hard stuff. Guy like you, watches his ground so good you're on my ass in minutes, you probably know what goes on here, don't you? Be a lousy businessman if you didn't."

Passenger door looked at me. I got hopeful. "Yeah, right. I know what's what. And I know I don't give no flying fuck about you. Why don't you take your ass on out of here before I stop feeling so fucking generous."

"OK, man, look. I got the impression Fontana was a friend to a lot of people."

"Ain't never said he wasn't. Only said why should I give a fuck about you?"

"Because, man, people care about the guy. I got called in 'cause I have a rep for doing it solid. Honest. Maybe you never met no one like that."

"Maybe. Definitely."

"Yeah, but Fontana was a friend of yours, you know what he meant to people. Somebody killed him, they get away with it, unless there's something you know's gonna happen. Or did happen."

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"Don't be knowing nothing about that. Nothing about that."

"OK. Fine. But I'm thinking two people dead, cops not doing shit. People aren't talking."

"Oh, you want to know why folks don't talk?"

"Yes. Actually I do. I want to hear your side of it. Nobody's been straight with me."

"All right then. But my ass ain't standing out here. You come with me."

"OK."

### *Thirteen*

For the curious, area inside an inner-city dealer's apartment is not all that different from yours or mine, quality of the electronics leans to pricy, if you're thinking retail, but other than that, place was clean and sedate, apart from the arsenal laid out on the coffee table for the benefit of the guest.

Most of our conversation was about the life of Darren, former L.A. nightlife stalwart, late of the New York scene, currently laying low, very low, in Southwest Baltimore. Took it with a grain. But the useful part was that, though Fontana et al had indeed purchased from his sales reps, it was strictly weak stuff, pot, little coke. Boys didn't ever buy much more than a dime bag, and Fontana had been laying off, not having visited for more than six months.

Of course, Darren was supposed to have been in New York for some big bashes, three months ago if not last week, but you don't sweat the timelines much when you're the only one not strapped.

Agreeing to do a feature on him should the occasion ever arise, I left Darren and his minions, was gladdened to discover my car had gone untouched, and drove off to a park I knew to sit and think.

### *Fourteen*

Park I went to overlooked a golf course, out in the moonlight there was one of those east Chesapeake old-style plantation homes, slightly to the west a valley where America's first railroad track was laid. Thankfully it was the kind of place one took hookers too rather than met at, so the automobile departures and arrivals, with their less-than romantic squearings, were not accompanied by taps on my window and a half-toothed leer asking "you looking, baby?"

Simple story. Guy died, meant a lot to people, they wanted to talk, media screwed it up, people stopped wanting to talk, editor was embarrassed, outsider got called in so person X could say she was trying, outsider loathed editor, presumably for deep-rooted psychological reasons, but in any event didn't much care whether she or her organization lived or died, and anyway first dead guy was simply another vanquished musician on the road to rock 'n roll.

If it hadn't been for the second shooting, I'd have gone home, fudged the names, made up a few quotes attributed to Joe Dokes in black leather, collected my fee, and moved on from there, as confident in my former employer as a source of income as I had been for the previous two years.

But something didn't sit right with me. It wasn't any big attraction to solve a crime, frankly they'd instituted a "rotation system" at the Baltimore PD, so the smart, successful cops got moved from their beats, where they had sources, knew the layout, and could work on a case unhindered, into a new department where they dealt with a completely different kind of criminal, and another position change six-12 months later, thereby destroying whatever experience had previously remained on scene, long way of saying that the average person on the street was now more capable of solving crimes than the cops, at least until they got a new personnel department.

Think it was more a stubborn thing. It was my element, as much as it was anyone's, and I couldn't get anything more out of people than the previous dregs they'd thrown at them. I cared very little for my professional reputation, being the only cub reporter who didn't attend, let alone graduate, a good college, got little more than snarls at the office cooler, but I didn't want to let this one go without a zinger.

Somebody was gonna have to pull earwax out of somebody's ear, and until that happened, I wouldn't split.

Hardly a rallying cry, but when you've got nothing else to fight for yet feel like duking it out, even a lame statement like that will do.

### *Fifteen*

I didn't really feel like crashing that night, having been asleep mentally for a couple of years, so I returned to the funeral site. Place had been mostly cleaned up, cups strewn here and there on the sidewalk, but nothing out of the ordinary, Gypsy's had always provided tourists with that extra little bit of ambiance..

Side bar to the joint opened for business every weekday morning around 5:30. The place sold coffee,

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individually wrapped convenience store breakfasts, and an open-air plate of fried codfish cakes, whose origins and date of expiration were equally indeterminate.

Inside sat a few municipal workers drinking coffee before shift began, some day-laborers waiting hopefully for an assignment to arrive, and a few comparatively well-off building contractors, their eyes glowing at the overcast sky, tallying the benefits of a rained-out workday spent drinking beer, once six o'clock and legal drinking hours arrived.

I asked the bartender about a few people I'd hoped to find, was told they'd ben in later, ate something with a tasty cream filling and drank watery Maxwell House.

### *Sixteen*

I waded into a morning smorgasbord of rapid-fire TV newsbytes with the crowd, of particular interest were figure skating, local crime, and some guy who liked to jump off of buildings in costume. What few doubts I'd had about the benefits of late were completely erased by the time Porky and company arrived.

Even in the drabest neighborhoods, there's always some dude who stands out by being relatively with it, managing to stay with his buds while earning an exceptional living. In this neighborhood it was a guy named Sam, big bearded fellow, forearms like a sailor's, piercing stare that could make you nervous, all the more intimidating when you realized he ran a million-dollar construction firm, but still paid his people off with hundreds, every night.

Sam was very protective of his staff in general, Porky in particular. They were family, kin, given that most area long-timers had family in the highlands of Appalachia; most could identify an uncle in the bootleg trade, all shared an affinity for Guns & Roses, Janis Joplin, and whoever the hell it was wrote "Hillbilly Highway."

I went to Sam and introduced myself. He remembered me, but didn't make too much of it, just grunting an affirmative. This was important, as continuing on without his approval made the risks associated with walking city streets at night look like Sunday afternoon at a Disney park.

Bought Porky a coffee, asked him if he wanted to tell me anything about his friend Fontana. Porky looked at Sam, got the nod, agreed to talk outside with me.

### *Seventeen*

"Oh yeah," he started. "I been real sad. Real sad since Fontana died. We was good friends. He took me down the ocean with him one time."

"Down the ocean, Pork? First time you ever been there, I'll bet."

"Yeah. And he took me up there. Onstage with him. At the ocean."

"Wow." I was starting to get bummed. But memory served, Porky didn't lie. Had too many people watching him, couldn't get away with it."

"So you sang a song?"

"Oh no. No. I wouldn't do that. No sir. Don't have a good voice. Remember some of them girls here, they had good voices. I used to listen to them sing. Even used to dance with them. Yes sir."

"Wow, Pork. So, did you play drums?"

"No sir. No sir. I didn't play those drums. That drummer, the one in Mr. Fontana's band. He didn't like me. Not at all."

"OK. No drums. You danced onstage?"

"Oh yeah. I danced. A little bit. Everybody danced. Not on the stage though. No sir."

"So, what did you do, Pork?"

"I told my story. That's all. Told my story and that's all."

"The story?"

"The story. You know the story. I don't got to tell you the story."

"So you remember me, Pork?"

"Sure I do. You was the one, gonna be a big shot. I told you, it was better hanging around, staying with people who love you."

"Well, we both know who's right there, Pork. I'm hardly a big shot."

"Yes sir. And right here where I live, there's plenty of people love me. Yes they do. Know me. Protect me."

"Got me there, Pork. Got me there. So how'd that trip happen? You and Fontana, and his band, going to the beach?"

## A Crowded Funeral

"Oh, we was working together. Yes sir. He'd be in the kitchen. I'd help out washing dishes. He talked about it with me. All the time, said he was gonna take me on the road with him. Said they were gonna love me. Do you trust me, Mr. Gaston?"

"Course I do, Pork. Course I do."

"I would have gone with him. I would have. The first few times he asked me, I was scared. I admit that. I don't never want to leave home before. Not ever. Don't know what's out there. Don't know what people are like. That's not true. I know what people are like. They're bad. It's that simple. You hear what happened to Timmy?"

Timmy was another neighborhood guy. Mean-spirited types always ranked him and Porky one two for mental disability."

"No Pork. I didn't hear. What happened to Timmy?"

"He was out there, one day, some of those new folks came into town. They grabbed Timmy. Yes sir. They grabbed him."

"Oh God. Pork, what did they do to him?"

"They shaved his hair. Yes sir. They shaved his hair. They gave him a mohawk."

"Bet not many folks around here liked that."

"Oh no. Butch, John, Sam, all the guys, they took care of the folks done that. Took care of 'em good."

"Bet they did."

"Yes sir. They took care of 'em good. So good, Timmy never got bothered again."

"Sam. Yeah, I'll be Timmy never got bothered again."

"But folks like that around here, when they mess with Sam. I didn't want to know what it's like outside there."

"Other places, folks aren't as mean as they can be here, Pork."

"Yeah. That's what Fontana told me. You and him, told me the same things. I wanted to go with him. That's for sure. I wanted to go on tour with him."

"It's been really hard for you, hasn't it, Pork."

"Oh, it's never easy when you lose a friend. Never easy. Don't get any better. I've lost a few now. Had my wife, she passed."

"Oh, Pork. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah. She passed. She passed. It happens."

"Wow. God. I didn't know."

"Yeah. Looked forward to travelling with Fontana and his band."

"You got along OK with the rest of them? Except for the drummer, right?"

"Oh, even the drummer. Yeah. We got along. They liked me. Bought me a few beers on that ride home. Yes sir. A few beers." Porky smiled. Remembering. He could get off topic quick when the subject of beer got raised.

"So how about the other folks in the band. Any of them come by to hang out here?"

"Oh, Mr. Don, he'll come by. Think he'll be coming by today, as a matter of fact."

"How about another guy, Steven, or Bateman? Know him at all?"

"Oh sure. I knew Bates. They called him Norman. He was a real nice guy. Be coming in, he'd help me out. Him and Fontana, they was the ones bought me the beer at the end of the trip."

"OK. Yeah. I see." I didn't want to tell Pork. Ruin his day. Get him all riled up. Crew inside looked like they had work needed to do, Porky was the one who brought them sandwiches. I'd leave a message for Sam later.

"So what's Don look like?"

"Him. Orange hair. Pretty short. He works over at the bookstore. One by the college all the kids used to go to. Funny guy. He'd come by here, talk with Fontana. They'd have coffee. Get me a beer to drink with him. It was good."

"Yeah. I'll get you a beer myself tonight, Pork. Promise."

"Oh, that's OK, Mr. Gaston. You don't got to be doing nothing like that."

"Hey, Pork. You really helped me with my job today. I'm sorry you had to lose a friend like that. It's been hard for you."

"Yeah. It's hard. Real hard. Well, looks like the gang's ready to go. Time for work. I'll see you later. Yes sir. See you later."

"Later for you two, Pork. And thanks."

## A Crowded Funeral

They loaded up the truck. I put in a call to my voice mail, got a message from Branson that he was remembering something, wanted me to see it before the article got wrote, name in the paper 43 times, instead of just 42.

Thankfully, I was able to leave before finishing my cup of coffee. The store Pork mentioned was near an art college by Baltimore's train stations. Only one station had trains, the other had been annexed by the school. Memory served, the place opened around 8–9, depending on who was working and whether or not they wanted to talk to people.

Don hadn't been on scene the previous night, probably he and Joan didn't get along so well, disgruntled former employee most likely. He was the one I was looking for, or so I told myself.

And if it came down to it, I had my quotes out of the Porkster.

### *Eighteen*

The guy behind the counter had a wired look, and the smell in the air gave proof to the crime, also thought I spotted a bit of a seed on his tattered T-shirt. Don't get me wrong, I'm not against heads, unless and until they act snotty about it.

"Hi," I said.

"Yeah. Hi. We won't be getting the new Van Gogh books in until next month, after the exhibit hits DC. Save us both some trouble."

"That's OK. I was really hoping to find works by some second-tier abstractionist, so I could have it on the table and talk about how only I knew what good art was. There must be someone you've bored your friends with along those lines."

"I know you?"

"Ya don't have to. I'm looking for a guy named Don. Plays in a band with a couple people who just died. He around?"

"Couple?"

"Yeah. The one everybody went to. Another one last night. Both shooting victims."

"Who?"

"Fontana. Other one had the name of Bateman."

"Shit."

"What? Don't look like you stayed in last night?"

"Shit."

"Wonderful substance. Surely. Know where I can find Don?"

"He ain't here."

"Where he be?"

"Don't know."

"When's he supposed to be here?"

"I haven't checked the schedule in a while."

"You knew you had to be here."

"I got called in."

"OK. We're off on the wrong foot here. You had kind of a late night, right?"

"Yeah. Late early. Start with the stuff before seven..."

"Think you're gonna crash, but you end up extra wasted."

"That's the scene."

"OK. Could you check the schedule for me? Or else tell me where I can find him? I've got the names of other folks in his band, but they weren't in much condition to talk last night. Been told Don's the one I need."

"Mister, who the fuck are you?"

"Name's Gaston. I'm working on this story for the Sun."

"Got an ID?"

"Not on me. Freelance type."

"Yeah. Right. Freelance. I'll check the schedule for you."

"Or you can just tell me where Don might be hanging. Some girlfriend. Boyfriend. Crash pad. Whatever."

"Wouldn't know that."

## A Crowded Funeral

"Right."

The clerk turned around, opened the hatch to one of those Baltimore basements. From the way he crouched I gathered it wasn't full-sized. Funny thing, those basements. Used to joke that the only purpose they served was a hideaway in the event of Viking invasion. Asian marauders, no, they could fit in them. But anybody over six foot, never move around in those pits.

Minutes passed.

Call me sleepy. I'd found another purpose for those basements. They worked great if you wanted to duck out on a six-foot reporter. Didn't hear any hatches opening downside, but I didn't to check. Raced out front, doubled back, ran in a circle, finally figured out a way to the rear alley.

*Nineteen*

There was a time, years ago when I was young and foolish, that I'd actually given up smoking, lifted weights and cycled around as though I cared. Of course I'd come to my senses, but I wasn't going to be setting records, or even necessarily keeping pace.

Thankfully, the guy was in even worse shape than me. Livin' rasta perhaps, but very much not playing soccer with gusto. Three turns from the alley and you hit a major road, one of those median strips with non-negotiable close-in iron bar fences to keep the locals from stealing plants and selling them to, well, whoever it is buys stolen plants that have just been snagged off a median strip.

I watched him try to hop the fence, fail, try again, get half over, snag his pants on the metal, and drop prone, like an old dude after the Viagra wears off. His face was bleeding, eyes had that fox gonna gnaw off a limb look as he stared at his trousers and the interesting ribbon connect they made to the fence post. Seeing me again, he tried to stand up.

"Oh don't bother. It was funny enough watching you get there, try and hop the other side, you'll hit pavement and both of us are gonna die; you from stupidity, me from hilarity."

He just looked at me.

"I take it you're Don, right?"

"Yeah."

"Don, have you shot anybody recently? Have powder traces on your hands? Registered weapon in your name, or a bunch of people who know you have one?"

"No."

"Are you an illegal alien who's stayed here, working on a tourist visa, terrified the man's gonna ship you back home?"

"No."

"Have you engaged in selling nuclear secrets to the Chinese?"

"What?"

"Just say no. It was working for you."

"No."

"OK, then why in the name of nicotine did you take off and run? Are you noid?"

"Noid?"

"Paranoid? You know, excessive consumption of marijuana, over an extended period of time, causes certain behavior changes, among them sleeplessness, lack of interest in sex..."

"Nobody says 'noid any more."

"Oh come on. Most likely, nobody ever did. I didn't have cable when I was a kid. Stuck watching network crap. Left me stupid and out in the cold."

"OK."

"Still haven't answered my question. Why'd you run from me? Nobody's afraid of me. People come up to me in bars and tell me how I don't scare them."

"Mister, I don't know you."

"That's why I was trying to have a conversation. The name's Gaston. If you'll let me give you a hand, I'll tell you so much about me, you'll care about me even less than you did when I first walked into your store. My mother's name was Edwina. She moved to..."

"I get the picture."

## A Crowded Funeral

"... Baltimore from her home in West Virginia with the family. One of the youngest children of the Depression, she married my father and they set up a decent, blue-collar type life just outside the city line..."

"Give me a hand."

"But you haven't yet found out about the great grades I got back in reading class, and how that convinced me the one thing I absolutely had to do was become a journalist. This was second-year elementary school, of course, so I wanted to do that as well as be a fireman and rocket pilot. Ain't it great how kids dream?"

"Fine. Fine. Help me."

He'd stood up, looking trapped and sad, like a puppy at the kennel. I moved to help him, at first thinking the picture might be odd, one man backing down a fence with another guy's face right at his ass, saying "easy, easy, I got you," but of course this was Baltimore near the art college, so all I was really doing was fitting in.

We crossed the street. He sat down on the curb.

"You walk OK."

"Yeah."

"Don't you want to go back to the store? You know, lock up?"

"Think I just quit."

"OK. Leaving town?"

"Soon."

"How soon?"

"Soon as I ditch you."

"You are, I believe, a material witness in a murder case. Possibly two. When did you last see Fontana?"

"Couple hours before."

"Was he with that guy, Branson or somebody else?"

"Alone when I left him."

"How 'bout his girlfriend?"

"What about her?"

"Is she gonna run across the street, making an ass out of both of us? I need to know 'cause I'll have to buy a pair of running shoes."

"No. She won't be like that. Mellow chick. Been around."

"Great. Still haven't told me why you rushed off?"

"Cause somebody killed those two."

"Yeah. I didn't think they'd walked into a half-clip full of bullets by accident."

"Right. OK. Cops are going to look into it."

"I believe so. Yes. Will take them some time though. Cops are like that. Thorough, get yesterday's news next week. Did you think I was a cop?"

"No. You're not a cop."

"Did you think I was the killer?"

"No."

"Did you think?"

"Guess not."

"Well look, I probably broke it to you hard. If I did, I'm sorry. Thought all the people knew. Bateman have family?"

"Us."

"Lot of pot smokers?"

"Just his band, all his friends, and the people he met casually."

"How long were you together?"

"Off and on. Years. Lot of years."

"OK. Did Bateman deal?"

"Sure."

"Did Fontana deal?" No reaction. Kind of a snort. Don had the ability to make you want to smack him. Hard.

"Do you deal?"

"Not on me. Check back later."

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"How much did you guys deal?"

"Had a friend, college, scored a QP every couple weeks from his sister in Arizona. One spring break had an entire pound. Never much more than an ounce since then."

"Other substances?"

"Gotta work the balloons, man. You barely pay for the hall otherwise."

"Entrepreneurial. But of course, all you going out stealing the nitrous oxide tanks, explains why dental care costs have risen so sharply. Doesn't it?"

"Yeah. Kind of."

"OK to walk?"

"Sure. Where we going?"

"You don't want to go back to work?"

"Cops'll be there."

"Right. But if you're not, they'll really look for you. When they see you now, they'll just want information. You give them that, you're pretty much free to go."

"OK."

"So let's go back where you work, lock the door, you smoke another bowl or something, and then you can tell me about Fontana. And Bateman. And Fontana's girl. OK?"

"Yeah. Sure. OK."

"Great. And don't take off on me again. You ever hear the line, 'flight is evidence of guilt?'"

"Heard it. Some cop show."

"Great. Then here's the new one: flight is evidence of wanting to get your ass kicked by a pissed-off freelancer who does not feel like running after you."

"OK."

"Good."

### *Twenty*

The cops still hadn't come for Don by the time I split. He wedged himself behind the counter, under a premise of stocking/inventory, he moved a series of prints and canvasses in front of the windows, making the place pretty dark.

Don had no idea who'd killed Fontana and Bateman, or why. But between nervous glances out a small pane in the front door, said door it's pretty sure the guy locked after I left, he did give up some info.

His last name was Lombard, no relation to the street, possible connect with the Germanic tribes. Band had neared the verge of maybe, with a couple of possible record company contacts. I believed that, because Mr. Lombard had seen half a dozen other near the verge of maybes.

Of greater interest was what he had on Fontana's personal life. The waitress had been an on and off thing for a while. He wasn't sure if it was off or on currently. But Fontana worked something quiet as well, dates and times unclear. In the event of scheduling conflict, Lombard was unsure which once got called first.

He suspected they'd known about each other, hence the fact that neither attended the funeral.

I got the name of the older one and the place she worked out of, Evelyn Raphael, she sold something. They gave me the phone number, just voice mail, "I'm on the other line right now."

Bored, figuring she'd be good at the telephone blow-off, and learning that the other girl wouldn't be in until four, and discovering, during a sophisticated investigation, that there were only three Raphaels in the book, only one whose name started with E., and that E. had the same phone number as the one I'd gotten from her place of business, I decided to pay her a visit at home.

### *Twenty-One*

It was one of those great city houses, only a few blocks away from a notorious body-dumping ground, rising on a hill with picket fences, old design, like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm." Car was parked in the driveway. No answer at the doorbell. Was about to leave when I saw a large mass of muscle and teeth on the steps behind me.

Explained why she wasn't worried leaving her name in the book. I looked at the dog, had that mental intruder's debate going on: "smile/not smile; wave/not wave; urinate/not urinate/please not urinate."

But something was bugging the creature, or maybe he'd just eaten salesman. Quiet as he was, and he was too damn quiet, I thought I caught him whimpering. Remembering how none of the men escaped Cujo's gaping jaws

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in that book, I figured what the heck, and reached out to him. Slow. Hands below his head so he could track 'em at leisure.

He moved close to me, licked. One-hundred-and-eighty degrees from what he'd been trained. Or else the salesbabe had bought one shitty dog. Tag on neck read "Basker." Guess he was a famous breed. I looked at him. Real careful I asked "go inside?"

Basker didn't do anything. "Inside?" I said again.

Nothing. Not a bark. Creepy. I turned around, slow, opened the door. Basker pushed past me, raced inside and up the stairs.

"Hello?" Big enough house to have echoes. I figured I'd stay slow, not want to freak out the master or the servant, she might be packing something, he, planning something... maybe they taught him at school how to make it look like an intruder.

Front parlor led into a kitchen. Place was decked out on a country theme, copper pots hanging, crockery everywhere, replendent in what was a likely expensive autumnal theme. Next room over had the fireplace, quality home entertainment center, purchased from a major department store, no doubt.

Books on the shelves, romances mostly, some over-sized art, one biography of the Marquis de Sade.

I called out a few more times, both to Ms. Raphael and Basker. No answer, so I went up the stairs, my feet smacking the hardwoods with maximum force as I sought to announce my presence.

Just off the landing at the top of the stairs I found Basker. Ms. Raphael was there too, well-wrapped in what would no doubt have been an extraordinary black stockings-corset thing, had it not been for the small holes and large red trails that rolled off her body and onto what seemed to have been a recent upholstery job.

### *Twenty-Two*

Of course everything started then. Couple of white kids get capped on the street is front page, if the night's slow. Upper-ish class white chick at home showing skin gets capped is lead story at five, if nobody got nuked that day.

A mainstream reporter and I would share the byline, her doing the writing on this one and chatting up the cops, me giving some notes. Fontana's story was still mine.

Between detective chats I sat out in the parking lot, reminiscing with some of the old camera crewman about a roving assignment editor, guy who'd been fired from every job in the region for alcoholism and drug addiction. We all remembered the day he'd gotten shot by the feds on Interstate-95, following his 25th, and last, bank robbery.

The cynicism was there, making fun of the reporters, joking loudly when the police spokesman got on camera, wondering out loud who was sleeping with who. I was starting to feel like a newsman again.

Cops were trying to rattle me a bit for getting there before them, but of course, they hadn't paid attention when it started, so most of that afternoon got spent covering their own asses. Also they appreciated the fact that Basker was calm around me. I got to hold him when they examined the body. Big guy was loyal. Seriously loyal.

"The matter has been under investigation, and we are now reviewing suspects."

Love it when they say that. Like if they'd had any idea it wouldn't have been leaked before the yellow "don't cross: tape got put up. I was revving hard on the smug-and-sleepy combo when a girl walked up to me.

"Are you Gaston?"

I looked at her close. Multi-colored dreads, more rings in one ear than doughnuts in a dozen. For a minute I'd thought I'd found Fontana's girl.

"Yeah. What do you need?"

"I took care of Eve's dog when she was away."

"Sweetie, he's all yours."

"Thanks, babe. Where can I get him?"

"Have to give your name and address to the cops. They'll make it real easy on you. Nobody wants Basker. But hang on a second. Ms. Raphael travel a lot?"

"Sometimes. She took vacations. Few business trips."

"How long you known her?"

"Off an on. Came into my restaurant. Tipped. Sat for a few drinks at the bar."

"Which bar?"

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"Over by the courthouse."

"Oh?"

"It's a lot of fun at the courthouse."

"Yeah. All kinds of people up Calvert St."

"Walk on the wild side."

"Right."

"You know, they think the same person killed her shot Fontana, and another guy."

"I know. I know. It's been happening so fast. I can't believe it. I didn't know anybody well. But still. My night off. Thought I'd come, do what I could."

"Anybody come in with her a lot? Anybody, not business-looking?"

"What, you mean looking odd to me?"

"You know what I mean?"

"She'd talk to people there. Cool lady. Knew what was what. Not like the guys who came in."

"Didn't know what they were meeting, huh?"

"Hey, somebody's got to pay for designer pantyhose."

"Too tight for my budget."

"Glad you didn't talk about another area."

"Yeah. Figured you've been there."

"Figured right."

"Can I give you a number, case you want to talk a bit more? Me and Basker get along great now, so we could just talk about that. Or anything you remember about Eve."

"Evelyn."

"OK. Evelyn. Sorry, nobody she worked with has come by. Haven't been able to check the name."

"Least you said sorry. Lot of these folks — they're making it sound bad. Not surprised nobody else came by. Place she worked for sells stuff to rich white people. Don't like that kind of press."

"Right. Last question before you get Basker. Was she part of the art scene? Painting on the side?"

"No. Just went to a lot of shows. Sometimes brought her friends in. Everybody loved her. She could bring in the money too."

"Heard anything about her and Fontana?"

"Already said last question."

"Right. Sorry. But, you know."

"No. I didn't. But I didn't know her personal life. Just her dog. Lot of folks were supposed to be going out with that guy."

"OK."

"Yeah."

"I can help you with the cops if you give me your name."

"Cassie. Cassie Lupe."

"As in travel around?"

"L-U-P-E, as in probably screwed up wolf name or something."

"OK. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Come on, let's get the dog."

### *Twenty-Three*

I met up with my byline mate at a 24-hour deep fry past the city's waterfront drinking range. Her name was Margaret Ann, and despite her pedigree I knew from some of the crew I'd met that she had at least done some time, cutting her teeth working for a legendary weekly down south.

Her appearance worked to. Casual, but all business, like she didn't have to worry about appearance so much; just getting the story. I even thought twice before blowing smoke in her face.

"Sorry for that."

"It's OK. I'd been forewarned."

"Great. What's the rumor now?"

"You bit that arm of one of your editors back when you first started out, growing more erratic until you got

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canned."

"Good rumor."

"Want to give me the whole story?"

"Nah. Got to keep some mystery. I ever have to park there again, know for sure my car won't get scratched."

"Gaston, you don't strike me as a car guy. You know? Some guys, put a lot of time into cars. Not you. Not a car guy."

"Right. Guess not. FUD's a positive though."

"What's that?"

"Fear. Uncertainty. Doubt. Heard it?"

"Did the business reports for two years before I got assigned to metro."

"So, have you heard it? Not much stock reporting in that paper."

"Yes. We pulled that kind of stuff off the wires all the time. Suspect you mean you want people to be leery of you... vaguely."

"Based on a rumor."

"Cause they're not afraid of the real thing anymore."

"Something like that. Anyway, about Ms. Raphael?"

"She's dead."

"Good one."

"Yeah. Her background?"

"Sold stuff. Very upscale. Office suite decor. For offices too smart ever to let in a guy like you, Gaston."

"Yeah, but Mary–Anne, what office isn't too smart for that. Why I like to jump into places when most people are asleep."

"Right. I'll keep that in mind. My husband wouldn't like it though. So call first."

"Sure. Who have your sources told you probably did the killing? Anyone suspecting a former boyfriend? Restraining order in the recent past? Like that?"

"No. Just know she was shot. Wearing a relatively exotic daytime ensemble."

"Relatively?"

"Benefit of the doubt. They haven't been so definite about when she was killed."

"Well, I'll bet you it was after midnight."

"And that's because?"

"Somebody else who knew a guy named Fontana got capped after midnight. By the way, why were't you working on that one?"

"Oh, that's all yours. All yours. Haven't had the pleasure of working with Janice."

"Right. OK. You know, she's great when you want to make fun of somebody. Good way to pass the time."

"Yeah. But we're busy, so we usually do it behind her back."

"I'm starting to like you. Could be hug–time."

"Just a pat on the head. And only if you mean it."

"Right. Anyway, Mary–Anne, even after the story got screwed? I heard half of it."

"The second reporter sent in was painted. Multiple colors."

"Any messages?"

"No. Just painted. And shaved."

"That's pretty cool. Neighborhood writing messages on old baldy. Hmm."

"No. He wasn't shaved... there. They left his those hairs just the way they were."

"Heard he was assaulted. Ouch. Itchy."

"Right. He's since quit our organization to study for the GMATs, or the LSATs, anyway, got mom and day to pay for grad."

"So, you didn't want to go in there?"

"And save Janice?"

"I see."

"Plus, I've got my beat. Things have been pretty busy. Past couple of weeks, in addition to the usual gang stuff and Saturday night special features, we've had two women found dead in midtown."

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"Prostitutes? Shot in the face? Couple days apart?"

"How'd you know? No. No. No. No."

"Somebody planned it. Got to get practice. You want to practice killing, there's a minor league, get a few hits, move on to the show."

"Why? Is there money around? Big wad of cash? Relatively big wad of cash? Some folks in those parts have been known to kill for quarters. A ten grand stash..."

"Yeah. But whoever it is didn't both to snatch anything from Ms. Raphael's place. Woman with secrets. Bet you 10 she'd have a safe or something. Anyway, it would make sense to look. So money, I don't think so."

"What do you think?"

"Don't know. I didn't even know Raphael and Fontana were related. Can't have been anybody tough, though. You're tough, or you think you are, wouldn't have to practice. Hey, Mary-Anne, ever thought of going and interviewing hookers on the west side of midtown? See if they saw anything? Anybody acting out of hand? You know, those older ones..."

"Yeah. They got a sixth sense about it. Right? And they'd be more comfortable talking to a woman reporter?"

"Well, at least I'm not asking you to try and dress like one."

"Thanks ever so much, Mr. Jedediah Gaston."

"Glad to see someone hangs with George."

"Got my back every night. What'll you be doing?"

"Well, there's Lombard, played with Gaston, knew him, two other band members who were part-time affiliates. Think I met them last night when Bateman was killed. The funeral MC wants to chat with me again. But of course, there's the most important person of all."

"And that would be?"

"Fontana's other girlfriend."

"How many did the guy have?"

"Hush hush. You shouldn't even think those thoughts. You're married. Centered in the hearth."

"Right. It's because I'm married I think those thoughts. How many did the guy have?"

"You're not asking me to tally up the roadkill, are you?"

"Roadkill? Term I hadn't heard."

"Well, the other road term isn't so polite for young ladies?"

"Meow, Mr. Gaston? Only fun we'd have when I got started was running over to Mobile and Nashville, life on the street in sultry southern towns."

"I see. Yeah. Color me stunned. No doubt I'm the naive one. Anyway, I'll try to find Fontana's main girl. At least so far as I know. I called, she hasn't been to work. But there's still questions about Ms. Raphael?"

"Life on Calvert?"

"That's the place."

"Well, as my editors have it, she did work out with some serious law firms and such, going into the district court. And of course, she'd entertain clients at a place that was convenient."

"And of course, those law firms do lots of business with the city."

"Right. And she was just alone. The victim of a heinous crime."

"Right."

"Don't need to know anything about her livelihood. Since it wasn't a jealous boyfriend or jealous mate of boyfriend, right, Mr. Gaston?"

"I remember this drill."

"You'll have to do better on it. Or next time it's drop and give me 20."

"Mm-hmm."

"Well, guess some things I don't need to know. Though of course, I do have a connection with a friend, girl from that district who's got the dog now. Raphael have any family?"

"Brother a thousand miles away. All we know so far. Maybe a sister or two."

"Great headlines for them."

"It's been toned down. Even the pictures won't be shown, just her in a company brochure."

"That's nice."

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"Yeah. When should we make contact again?"

"Soon. Please. Here's my cellphone number. I understand you never answer yours?"

"First people find you, then they start relying on you, then they take you for granted..."

"Then they kill you bit by bit?"

"Not as poetic as I was going for. But OK."

"Yeah. I'll get the check."

"City girl making it. Husband a doctor?"

"Works for a biotech."

"Never mind. I'll get the check."

"Why's that?"

"I know how much your paper pays. And I've done work for biotechs. Especially around here, imagine, towards the end, when they only pay people in stock options."

"Haven't reached that point yet. But thanks. Should have ordered the lobster on you."

"Nah. Need you healthy."

"Oh, it's OK. I've talked to prostitutes on the west side before. They really don't mind it when you throw up."

"Right. Later, Mary-Anne."

"Later."

### ***Twenty-Four***

Having the time, thought I'd check back in with Branson. Let me know I cared, just in case he'd got something important to tell me. Guy picked up on the first ring, sounded eager.

"Hello."

"Yo. Man. Gaston. Where you been? Have something else to tell you."

"Let me guess. Fontana had another girlfriend."

"No. Well, yeah. Her. She's dead."

"I know. I found her. You know her?"

"Nah man. Typical stuff. That guy. He was into a kind of lady."

"What kind?"

"You know, been touched a lot."

"Been touched. OK. Sure. Right. Guess the lady would qualify. But you didn't know the deceased."

"No -- well yeah. I saw her around."

"And you wouldn't have had experience, kind of places she'd come by in. Used to hang out in a bar on Calvert?"

"Right. East side. Yeah. Young man over on the east side, not in college. Know what kind that is? Right. Want to hear what this old dude calls folks from over there?"

"What would that be?"

"Hebeshebes."

"Hebeshebes. OK. I'll probably use that one. Mr. Lou, you've proven yourself worth 35 cents. I'll call you again."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. I heard some things from some folks."

"About what?"

"About a big thing coming in."

"For Fontana?"

"That's right."

"What kind of deal? Record deal? Drug deal? Shipload of Asian illegals to work the sex trade? Scratch that last one, enough underpaid locals in the industry already, sex shop owners get worried, somebody start a union or something. What kind of deal?"

"I don't know. Just, a big one."

"Right. OK. A big deal. Anyone in particular tell you?"

"No. I'm just helping you out, right. Nobody special."

"Guys on the street."

"Something like that."

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"Thanks for your help. I'll be in touch."

"But..."

"Later."

Definition of a loser: guy who's trying to impress someone way down on the totem pole, and failing badly. Social-climber's equivalent of only hitting on ugly girls with indifferent personalities; if you lose, you're a dork in front of friends, you win, ooh.

### *Twenty-Five*

Still no luck with Fontana's girl. The other one. I'd told the cops and they were checking too. Mary-Anne had connections, promised to let me know quick if anybody'd heard anything. I wandered around the small art galleries north of the harbor, everyone talking about Evelyn, how they missed her, already.

Lady was supposed to have a vibrancy, enthusiasm. Brought in people, women, men, all of 'em loaded, rip-ready to spend, her steering them towards "appropriate outpourings of the human spirit that meshed well in a set decor." Or something like that.

The gallery owners would really miss her. Said the best thing she did for them was come in with a single guy. Older, loaded, ranking eight out of ten on the passive-aggressive scale. Got the impression same faces were showing up time and again, but it was closed door in terms of seeing names on checks.

Figuring I'd been on the go long enough, I grabbed a hotel room, whipped off a few paragraphs that I read into Mary-Anne's voice mail, watched cable for approximately 60 seconds, and fell dead asleep.

### *Twenty-Six*

That night I dreamed of Fontana, sought him out through neighborhoods and zones. first I read the leaflets on posts by college-themed pubs in Charles Village, then a shred of a silkscreened T in a gutter near the gay bars, then the waterfronts, the parksides, everywhere he'd been the crowd giving the same quiet respect.

Finally I chased him through the old vaudeville playplace, down East Baltimore St., the tattered strip bars giving way by the power of reverie to burlesques and nickelodeons. for a moment I paused near a old-style carnie barker, his bullhorn-powered pitch a combination of ocean-front mayhem and city market abacab, both of us staring down a fat woman as she glanced at herself before a trio of funhouses mirrors, the likenesses combining to form a gross parody of a gross parody of a gross parody, when I thought I saw Crofton making the turn down Gay St.

I went to follow him, sure I'd catch him on what was once the Mid-Atlantic's street of dreams, where so many farm boys visited and never again returned home, but the curve led me to boarded up houses, the avenue cut off to make way for an oversized interstate.

Fontana was nowhere in sight.

### *Twenty-Seven*

Clock said 3:17 when I woke up. Mary-Anne had checked back with me, said she'd taken my text verbatim, also indicated that Janice wanted to coordinate with both of us and dispense editorial input. Mary-Anne indicated that anytime would be fine for that, by her schedule, as long as the meeting occurred after her dog was done with the first set of puppies.

Still not sure on that one, but Mary-Anne had always seemed the spaying type to me, and with her help I could get paid anyway.

The other bit of news was that the cops still hadn't found Fontana's girlfriend. Nobody seemed sure whether she was a witness, a suspect, a potential victim, or all the above, but they really, really wanted to talk to her.

Not many places you can look for a girl at 3:30 in the morning. Or rather, there's places you can look for a girl, but not one in particular. I thought about how a good reporter would be going over to Calvert St. right about then, trying to find out if anyone working the zone had been on good terms with the late Ms. Raphael.

The likely scenario of me getting confused for a John by a Johnette, or worse, by some cops watching, took the fun out of that idea. Also, the lady would have had to be discreet if she was working some scam like I thought she was, so I convinced myself it wasn't worth looking at. In any event, the likelier possibility was that she was out there hustling up younger talent, teens between 15-20, on the city-county line, which of course fell into Mary-Anne's territory. I'd tell her to check it tomorrow.

Having established firmly that I wasn't going to be talking to any prostitutes that evening, there remained very little else to talk to. Fontana moving drugs seemed out. Couldn't think of a club that was still open. Sensible thing

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to do would have been to fall back asleep. Still, when you're up late in the city that breeds and don't want to drive to the county for 24-hour corporate chain grease and fries, you have to take that walk and find yourself something to do.

For me, it was Greek food, made by Iranians, in a place owned by a Korean. Who says Crabtown ain't got an ethnic mix.

### *Twenty-Eight*

Guilt hit me as I left the hotel lobby. Place I stayed was on St. Paul, speedy jaunt through a marble statue park, and I was on lower Calvert. Since I was working on a theory about the place, had to at least check it for a minute, even if it was too late to discover much.

I wandered down street, past the cooking school, saw a few dubious genders, stepped quietly past the Holocaust Memorial, my ears awash in the sounds of distant copulation, when I heard a new noise.

"Leon."

Shouts from up the street, too far and too dark to see much, but they were getting closer.

"Leon. Lee-yon."

Got the walk straight instinct as I saw a lone man rushing towards me. He was in his 40s, at least, Army surplus jacket, likely earned his living on a corner with a sign. He saw me and stopped first. I kept walking. Like it was nothing.

"Leon. Come on Leon. Gotta stay somewhere tonight, Leon. Lee-yon."

The noise wasn't coming from him. Somebody far behind, but getting closer.

The man near me got his courage up. Approached. "Say hey buddy, can you spare a man a dollar for a coffee."

What the hell. "Sure," I said, pulling some cash from my pocket.

"Thanks man," he said, this was presumably Leon. "Listen, don't go back there. You'll get beat up."

"I'll bear that in mind."

He took off, once again at a dead run, though perhaps a happier gait than previously. The "Leons" were drawing closer now. I glanced forward and detected one of the stranger apparitions I'd observed in many years. Barreling down towards me was a 300-pound transsexual, his ensemble decidedly floral, moustache carefully waxed to match the color of his relatively eyeshadow.

Upon seeing me, he ceased his cries, city air immediately turned tranquil, apart from the faint sirens, without his primal yawps of hope and anguish.

"Did you just see Leon?"

"I presume so, yes."

"Did you give Leon money? You gave Leon money, didn't you? How could you give Leon money? What's wrong with you?"

"Um, he asked for it."

"Don't you know never to give someone like Leon money?"

"Well, it's late."

"Don't you know he'll just spend it on getting some hits?"

"Kind of late for that."

"But you know what you did is wrong. And now you've me just like this. How could you?"

"I'm just basically a bad person."

"Well, we already know that. Don't you even want to try to make amends?"

"How am I supposed to do that? I could never be Leon."

"Well no, you most certainly could not. Not in a lifetime. No sir. But you can make amends."

"How?"

"How? You can do for me what you did for him. That way I can follow him and make sure he has someplace to go home to."

"OK. But only because it's for Leon." I gave him \$20.

"Thank youuu." He ran off. Decent speed. Make a pretty good linebacker. Not sure about his quickness though.

Figuring nothing could top that, I continued on, when I saw a 30-ish woman and two teens. They looked angry. Approaching, one of them reached out at me. I turned, went into a basic martial arts stance I'd picked up."

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"He know Karate?" One of them said.

"Aikido," I shot back. Thinking the name exotic enough for them not to test whether I'd gone past two weeks of lessons. I hadn't, of course.

"Come on, we don't want to mess with him." This was the woman.

"He don't look like much." Other teen.

"He didn't call me a bitch." Woman again.

I had to ask: "why would either of them call you a bitch?"

"Don't know. What you mean?" She said.

"Nothing. Just seems to me like, you know, both of them been somebody's bitch. Makes it kind of hypocritical." This brought laughter, connection between urban souls. All thoughts of violence were abandoned, happily. Of course I had to pass out money again. Then when we parted company, for some reason, all four of us hugged.

Calvert Street was still very much as I'd remembered it.

### *Twenty-Nine*

I made it to the Greek place without further incident. Squeezing into a counter-spot with a view of meat spinning openly, attracting the buzzing flies that gave a gyros its special taste, I was treated to the sounds of Baltimore at post-drinking gourmet. Four guys at the counter, one half-pretty girl looking longingly at the leader, though her arms were wrapped around another. The conversation centered on ejaculation.

"So yeah. Hey, you know, you're drinking, you're with her, you're grinding it out. You get tired sometimes. Right? She wants you to finish. Maybe --- maybe you're doing like a real good job, right. Yeah. But it's got to get done. So the guy --- every guy, you know, they go "uuh," get out of bed and wash off. Finito. Only he didn't finish.

Girl looked up. "I don't believe you." But her eyes showed she'd take anything he said.

Leader was ready. "Come on guys. Show of hands. Who's faked it? You? Right? Ritchie? Right?"

They all nodded. Even one guy, kind of big, looking like he maybe didn't have much chance to do it for real, let alone fake it.

Leader was looking my way. I wasn't I felt like dealing with anybody. Least not 'til my Polish were ready. "How's about you? You ever fake it?"

"Fake it? Me. Yeah. Guess so. Yeah. I've done it."

"See? What I tell you? Everbody's done it. Everybody. You all thnk you're so hot. Just more repressed about it. We do it all the time too. Just ain't a big deal. Hey, we're thinking of you."

Some laughter here. A few high-fives. I looked closer at 'em, they had band stickers on their jackets, but enough baseball memorabilia to make me think they were local, despite accents that traced their roots more to cigarettes and beer than anything along the Chesapeake Bay basin.

It was fun to just listen to them for a while, mellow, eating my hot dog. Eventually, I asked the leader, name was Brian, about the events over the past couple of days.

"Did you know that guy?"

"What? Fontana? Not directly."

This brought giggles from Brian's entourage. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Well, we were connected to him. A little bit at least. Something we shared."

"How's that? Seems like everybody's claiming they knew him."

"Well, you're talking about bands. Yeah. You knew him. Or you heard about him. Wild guy, he'd be up there, playing, like he could do drums or jazz, you'd swear, guy heard the music once, you know, you could stop the music on him --- not stop the music, like just so he couldn't hear it, but you still could? Get what I'm saying?"

"Yeah. I think so."

"And Fontana, he'd jump right back in there. With you. And it'd be like he didn't miss a note. Nothing. No missed rhythm, had the tune there, in his own mind. Ever hear of perfect pitch?"

"He did that too?"

"Nah. Didn't sing. But he had it. Could have been anything. Hated that guy."

"Hated him? Nobody hates him."

One of the crowd shot out: "somebody must've."

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Brian got mad. It was the heavy one with the interruption. Brian gave him a look. Heavy gave the sign for "sorry, don't hit me." Brian

"Yeah. Somebody must've. But not me, man. Got something on him. He could make anything play. Had to cancel gigs 'cause he's gone. But I got something on him. We all do."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Larry's sister." This was heavy again. But they all laughed. Hard.

"Tell him," heavy said. "Tell him about Larry's sister."

"We all went down the ocean with Larry's sister. Right? Me, Scott, Eric, Carl, all of us. Just us guys. And her. And we get to hanging out, you know, drinking, smoking. Just rocking all around. It's wild. So we're out looking too, you know. And it's like that."

"The contest, man. Tell him about the contest." Heavy again.

Yeah. We're all having a contest. Only we don't know it at first. I don't know who was the one figured it out."

Nobody said anything.

"Like we realize, we've all been banging her. Every one of us. Great trip. And it keeps up. And we know it. And she knows it. Well of course she knows it. So each night, you know, it's like, who's taking her into the back of the trailer? It's whoever can stay up."

"Whoever can..." I added. "Whoever can stay up. 'Cause we're all banging her. But we're drinking. We've got good smoke. It's a blast. So every night, power bong hits."

They all laughed again.

"And then, whoever's still up. They get to hang with Larry's sister."

"That's right." Heavy. "Man, got wild. Never seen pot go so fast."

"Right. We burn through, must've been a QP, that week."

"And Larry's sister?" This was entertaining.

"We don't even talk about it. Not one time while we're there. We're all banging her. We're all competing to get her. And we're not talking about it. Not even on the ride home. There's only one time we mention it."

"When's that?"

"After we get home, the itch starts."

"The itch?"

"We all had crabs."

They laughed. I laughed too. Poor Larry's sister.

"So we've got to go to the drugstore, right? Get the shampoo."

"Right."

"So all of us, we walk down, go see the lady, order that shampoo. One after another. 'Hi, I need a bottle of that.' Slam down 10. 'Hi, I need a bottle of that.' Slam down 10."

"Hi, I need a bottle of that.' Slam down 10." Heavy

"And we go home and put it on. We're all just thinking, man, 'cause she's maybe gonna marry somebody respectable."

"Nice body." Heavy.

"And we're all wondering, she gives us an invitation, what do we say?"

"And then Fontana..." Heavy. Brian was mad now.

"And then Fontana," Brian's voice gets real quiet, I don't know if it's the story or 'cause he wants to smack heavy. "Fontana shacks up with her."

"Only it's not the beach." Heavy'd better learn."

"Right. It's not the beach. She's going to concerts with him. You see them buying clothes together. And shit, back when she had a band, she banged some guy from out of town, threatened to tell his girlfriend if he didn't let her band open for him. That kind of chick. Half this town nailed her."

"Man, straight out of afternoon TV."

"Right, only she didn't wear nothing shows her tits. Should have. But Fontana gets all in love with her. For a while she didn't even work."

"He must've been the one paid for the shampoo." Heavy. But they all laughed.

"She's living with her right to the end. Man. They were gonna breed. Guy could play, but he didn't know shit

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about women."

"Well, guess some guys like that," I said. "Experience."

"Yeah," said Brian. "But she wasn't no good at it."

They all laughed. I doubted I could print this, so I didn't bother to get names. Story kept getting stranger. But what the heck.

I thanked them all, said goodbye, wondered how I was gonna find Larry's sister. Thought of calling Janice, maybe I could tell her the story, get her to subsidize an investigation into area strip clubs.

Wouldn't work. Even Janice was too smart for that.

### *Thirty*

I walked back to the hotel room, my nose drenched in that peculiar urban morning combo of soft dew, cracked asphalt, and the semi-sweet rank of chunky vomit. Watching the sun rise I tried to get a fix on Fontana, what kind of guy he was, hero and laughing stock, great friend and foil.

Whatever the riddle was, had to have something to do with his women. Not many people knew about his association with Ms. Raphael. Only thing put them together for certain in my mind was the fact both were dead. Maybe the guy was at heart a legit feminist, behind my scope to judge, I'd never previously used that synonym for sucker.

Finding Larry's sister, though. I could look up Larry, maybe, but it'd be time-consuming, and odds weren't great he'd tell me if he knew. Funny thing, I used to know a lot of girls who slept around.

It made for interesting lunchtime conversations, though I kept my distance, and tended to get so drunk I embarrassed myself whenever one of them starting even considering me as a good life partner. There was no good reason for why they did it, apart from the psychobabble missing dad/drunk dad/underappreciative dad/name your whatever but it's 'cause of dad.

Still, when all you've got is a second-year social science text to guide you, might as well try and live it up. This was a girl who, for whatever reason, needed men. So when one she relied on had died, she'd either be with another one real fast, or else holed up where she'd known the last guy, perched on his turf, smelling his dirty socks or whatever.

Either way, the cops and I had both been looking in the wrong place for her. One thing she wouldn't be doing is going to her own lonely house.

### *Thirty-One*

In front of Fontana's club I found Don Lombard and a couple of faces I'd seen the place Bateman was killed.

"Mr. Lombard. I take it you're with the band?"

"Yeah. That's us."

The group wasn't real glad to see me. I get that sometimes.

"What y'all doing?"

"We're gonna bust inside and steal all of Fontana's hidden money." That was Lombard.

"I see. Any of you other folks want to reintroduce yourselves? It's been a long couple of days, hard to keep track of names."

Three band members, varying stages of body-piercing and tattooing. All look alike to you after awhile, though I was sure I could make up differentiating characteristics if the time came. Names were Mattie and Markie and Johnny, or something like that. Lombard spoke for them.

"So, yeah. Just figured we ought to meet."

"Decide if anybody else here's shooting somebody?"

"No, we're not doing that." That was Mattie. Or Markie.

"Would you admit it if you had?"

"Kind of an assertive style for you, Gaston?"

"Yeah. Funny thing, some folks, every time I talk to them, gotta watch him close make sure they don't hang their asses out on the nearest median strip. Got to be an undocumented white people compulsion. Seems to me like, in the worst cases, you'll get that urge, Lombard, to move to a trailer or cabin in one of them big flat square states to the west. And we all know nothing good comes from stuff like that."

"Right. Sure." I hadn't phased him. Bad sign.

"So, whatcha all doing? Haven't answered me yet."

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"Wanted to get our stuff," this had to be Johnny.

"Cool. And you left your stuff at Fontana's place since when?"

"Since the last night we played together." Lombard again. So helpful."

"And that was on which date? Which location?"

"Five nights out. Some town to the south. Go there a lot."

"Let me guess, I've heard his schedule, you passed a river named for a guy, where it met up with a river named for a girl, everywhere around a bunch of drunk sailors. Right?"

"Yeah. Not in Virginia Beach, but a place near there."

"Cool. And that was pretty much the last time most of you saw him alive. Right?"

"That's right." This was Mattie again. Or Markie. I resolved to select names at random if I ended up pulling the dialogue.

"So what happened?"

"That's a long story." Lombard.

"I got the time to come by this place. I sure as hell can sit for this. You three must've had time to get your stories straight by now, right? Test it out on me first, then you go to the cops with it."

"What's your deal, Gaston? You don't think we killed him."

"No. Probably not. On the other hand, for a while there nobody was thinking about who killed him at all. So I guess I have to think of everybody. You know Ms. Raphael's dead, don't you Lombard?"

"I heard it."

"So that means five people were killed. In about a week and a half. Might be more coming."

"Five?" This was — one of them.

"Yeah. Two prostitutes were murdered about a week before Fontana was shot. Same MO. No good reason for them to die. Dangerous business they're in, but still. A friend of mine is looking into it. What can you guys tell me? Why'd he get killed? And if you don't know, what was the last show like?"

"He was wild." One of them.

"Shut up. He was mellow. Really riding it out. Nice style." Another one.

"No, he was wild." First one again.

They started fighting. I watched. They disagreed. More and more. Strong opinions. Sky looked like rain.

"OK. OK. Hold it. Time to go in. One of you talk at a time. OK? Chill, right? Great."

Lombard did a trick on the front door, opening it through a handle lift. We moved into the lobby of Fontana's place.

### *Thirty-Two*

Story I pieced together of Fontana's last concert is as follows:

He and the rest of his band headed down to the Norfolk–Tidewater region in a van piloted and owned by Bateman. They played some hall whose audience consisted of wealthy college kids, sailors, couple of young reps from the shipbuilders union, and the odd fundamentalist Christian there to let Satan know he was being carefully observed for the reckoning that was sure to come.

Wild crowd, but of course the sailors were the loudest. Everybody agreed Fontana had been different that night. Lombard was sure he was wasted, on something cool; I detected a bit of anger against the man for the presumed sin of not sharing. Mattie and Markie, or maybe it was Johnnie and Markie, I'm pretty sure it wasn't Johnnie and Mattie, were of the opinion Fontana had just taken too many pulls off the grain.

Whatever, it's clear something was different: As with any occasion when playing to a military crowd, particularly a southern one, you'll get shouts for "Free Bird," the Skynyrd classic that justifies that rocking death to many the "serious" guitarist.

Feeling strange, Fontana launched into the set, lot of steel, decent beat, solo. He even sang it. The rest of Gonzo Jim Thompson were stuck looking at their instruments and feeling pretty stupid. Then he played, and, gets strange, was even better than usual.

Maybe it was the death factor, but they all had me believe they were on stage with a presence, only way to do him justice would be not name-dropping Fontana next to anybody, just, let's say, he'd have earned his own name and spawned a legion of bad imitators had he always played that way.

The effort before them was infectious. Gang agreed that, even though it was hardly their regular crowd, they'd

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given it the all, both for their own songs and the covers. Lombard remembered a serious response to a Nine Inch Nails tune they ripped. Unclear how the Christians reacted upon hearing that God was dead.

Instead of heading home early or trying to haul groupies into the fetid embrace of a cheap motel, they'd all wanted to hang with Fontana that night; see what had gotten into him, or just feeling the joy of really, really clicking.

Fontana was all out. His behavior scoring way high on the Lizard King scale. He'd gotten bottles out of the bar owner after promising to come back in two weeks, and took the crew on a jaunt through Norfolk central. Or else Tidewater. Nobody quite remembered, and apparently the borders are hard to spot.

Anyway, Fontana's with them, and they pass a hospital that's under construction. Mount name your biblical phrase. They're talking to him one minute, the next thing anybody knows he's halfway up the scaffolding, holding the bottle in his hand while zooming up.

At first nobody says anything, they've got that kind of fear about waking up a sleepwalker. But they can't let him go, and it seems like a real good chance to check out where the river named for the girl meets the river named for the guy.

So they all jump up after him. Figuring when they get to the roof, they can have a real party.

Well, nobody's got anything like Fontana's agility, so while they all do make up top, it's several minutes since they saw him. But hey, they're ready to party.

Fontana's been alone too long. Or maybe it's wearing off. Or maybe he didn't spill much of that now-nearly empty bottle. They get to the roof and he's talking to somebody. Only it isn't them. He's a total mess. Sort of like pleading with whoever, only there's nobody up there except sky, clouds, and some pollution wafting over from the steelyards.

They're all kind of scared, wondering how they can be successful if he's got to get that messed up to play.

Then Fontana sees them. Kind of smiles. Sobers up. Quits talking. Acts like he was trying to sing a tune. Lombard's willing to agree, that he was singing. Other three are less sure. They also got to the roof before Lombard, so you trust them more.

However it happens, party's pretty much over. Trip down from the roof is nowhere near as much fun as the one going up. Mattie or Markie says he was thinking maybe Fontana's gonna jump, they all thought Fontana didn't care as much about the drop potential as they did. Everybody recalled Bateman as being much cooler with it, but Bateman was closer to Fontana than anyone else in that band.

Trip home was uneventful. They agreed to practice per schedule after a well-deserved two days of rest. Then Fontana got shot.

Same second-year social science text that let me justify my pre-verdict on Larry's sister had it that Fontana's behavior was that of a man who'd stopped caring about something, either a big problem he'd been facing, money, relationship, kid on the way, or maybe life itself; going hog wild is pretty typical at the end, great samurai expect death, weaker ones fake it.

Beyond that, girl wasn't on the premises. Band was cleaning up the spot, considering putting together some kind of gig. They were worried a bit people would think they were cashing in. They were worried more they'd seriously suck without Fontana and Bateman.

Thought it'd make a great close to the story if they did play, so I didn't give my honest opinion of what the outcome of such a show would likely be.

I'd check out one or two other Fontana hangouts after I swapped notes with Janice and Mary-Anne.

### *Thirty-Three*

On the phone, Janice's voice had more of a passive aggressive lilt than usual.

"Mr. Gaston, you really should have contacted me before now. I've been trying to explain..."

"Jed."

"I'm not going to fall for that."

"Yes you will. Come on, who you kidding? You'll fall for all of it if it means you can maybe survive. Anyway, coming out of the AMWS."

"AMWS?"

"A meeting with superiors. I know how you journalism students love cute acronyms when it comes time to sound 'on it.'"

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"Yes. And they..."

"Wanted to know what the hell I was doing, and whether or not you were keeping close tabs, both on me and my expenses."

"Right."

"Because being in the throes of a blind corporation some 3,000 miles away, they gotta first and foremost MTBB and CTA."

"MT..."

"Make the books balance, and cover their asses."

"Right. So I have to..."

**"TTAB."**

"Huh."

"Throw them a bone. You're really not very good at this. Thought your senior year must have been spent sitting alone, just thinking up initials people'd only get if they bothered to read on. Anyway, TC..."

"TC..."

"To continue."

"OK. Right... TC..."

"You know, acronyms sound pretty stupid when you try them out, don't they?"

"Um."

"Tell your bosses Mary–Anne and I believe that the murders of Fontana, Bateman and Ms. Raphael are connected to the deaths of two prostitutes recently. By the way, do you know the difference between Gothic and Industrial music?"

"No. Should I?"

"Great. Just tell them Fontana's band was into Industrial."

"OK. I hadn't heard that."

"It's not even true. But of course, Goths have been having it rough lately in the press, and Mr. Fontana, Bateman with him, played all kinds of music. Nobody's into Industrial anymore, all the good warehouses got snagged by the urban renaissance."

"By the way, did Mary–Anne leave behind a report on the autopsy? Was hoping she'd have a copy."

"No, but she is right here, I can grab her for you."

"Well OK Janice, but you haven't yet UJRHFU."

**"UJR..."**

"Underqualified journalist rationalizes her failings... unconvincingly. And just 'cause you fell for it, do people like you still say the hardest thing about your job is when the manuscript on your desk that you couldn't make time for is the one that turned out great? Or have you given up on that one and taken the new tack, explaining that even in Balzac's day the print-shops were under fire from the artists?"

"I'll go get Mary–Anne."

"Sure. I'll hold."

Must have rattled her. She forgot to sentence me to Muzak in retribution. Mary–Anne wasn't immediately forthcoming, so I lit a cigarette and waited.

***Thirty–Four***

Finally Mary–Anne arrived.

"Gaston."

"Hi byline buddy. How's tricks?"

"Puns aren't your style. I went back and interviewed a number of ladies."

"What's the fashionable hooker wearing this week?"

"Clothes, though not very much of them, and not in an especially flattering manner."

"I'll keep that in mind. Anybody see anything? What were you going on before, anyway?"

"Thought it was a jealous boyfriend. They have them, you know. Then the thinking went that somebody new had come in and was just setting an example."

"Not quite "A" student material, but I get you. So what people see? Anything strange?"

"Everything strange. Hard to tell in that environment. They've seen a lot more cars just cruising, but maybe

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they're just looking for it. Nobody's taking on folks they don't know. As far as specific faces, maybe you could give me an idea?"

"Just got up from a long nap."

"Your dedication is stunning."

"So, police told you anything about Ms. Raphael?"

"Well, Gaston, I heard she was dead."

"Lovely. Thought I was supposed to be the sarcastic one."

"You just woke up. I need a long nap."

"You can snuggle with your husband later. I'm sure he's got elaborate molecules to discuss with you."

"I'll keep that in mind. But for now, I have been pouring over the autopsy of Ms. Raphael."

"What? That fast? Come on, city medical examiner has even less of a budget than previous. You got a favor, you got a favor."

"Girl's gotta have some secrets. Want to hear it?"

"Sure."

"Shot with a weapon roughly the same caliber as that used in the killings of Fontana, Bateman, Sharis Lewis and Simone Martin."

"Wow. The prostitutes have names now. Fontana's girl was the sister of somebody named Larry."

"Wonderful. Ms. Raphael apparently didn't have intercourse in the preceding -- well, 72 hours at least, more likely seven days."

"OK. Maybe she was a top."

"There'd be bruising; wasn't any."

"All right. How's about ligature marks and the like, wrist scuffings, things of that sort."

"No. Nothing like that."

"Calluses on her fingertips from cracking the whip?"

"Oh, all we women do that, Gaston. Never shows."

"You're wrecking my elaborate sex-scandal theory here."

"Well, if it can't stand up to little me."

"You got to love the storyline, at least; somebody has to have sent you into one of those shops."

"Yeah. And here's the punchline:"

"I'm listening."

"Nothing Ms. Raphael wore was bought speciality. Kind of thing you can get at any mall in North America. But strictly R-rated, if ratings mean anything anymore."

"Even Oklahoma? Thought they had laws."

"Silly man. Shops like that do their best business in Tulsa. Don't know if the church wives flip the little bag around when snagging a diet on the way out, but mail order's just dreamy."

"Oh too bad. It was the kind of story you could write without having to check facts or talk to anybody. I guess you had to have gone to a really good college if you want to write that way."

"Yeah. So, you're back to work now?"

"I did do a bit of checking. Apparently everyone who's anyone in this town knows Fontana's other girlfriend."

"Got a lead on her?"

"I mean knows in the biblical sense. And unfortunately, she wasn't the type you called about afterwards."

"Oh. Oh my."

"Keeps getting better. There's also a last night problem."

"Which is?"

"Don't know how to explain it. Stories have a way of building up after the end. Get what I'm talking about?"

"Think I've observed the phenomenon in person, yes."

"Well, Fontana was apparently wild on his last gig with the band."

"How wild?"

"Living like he wasn't afraid of dying. And climbing medium height commercial buildings to prove it."

"I see. And you found this out when?"

"After my nap. Snuck into his club. I was with the band."

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"They never respect you after you do that."

"Nope. They never do. So what does it mean?"

"Tell ya the truth, I have absolutely no clue."

"I'd guessed that about you."

"You are such a sweetheart. Admit it, husband does more than his share of household chores."

"We have a fine distribution of labor. He cooks the food, I eat it."

"Well."

"Well."

"I'll keep looking for Fontana's girl. Would you see if you can't find out more on Ms. Raphael's finances?"

"I'll check into it. Any other suspects?"

"Suspects? Hell, I'm the one found the body."

"Yes. You are."

"Well, maybe I'd better try and find someone else to blame. I'll talk with the girl who picked up Ms. Raphael's dog for starters."

"That's probably a good strategy. Think you can pin it on the dog?"

"Somebody's punchy."

"I'm worried somebody's out of practice."

"Mary-Anne. Didn't I make Janice cry just from a phone call?"

"You did that, yes."

"And this after already speaking with her and expressing my distaste on several occasions. She knows me by now."

"Yes."

"So how can you say I'm out of practice?"

"Well, I'd give you that. But she cries all the time. Makes it difficult when you're sneaking a cigarette in the bathroom."

"Oosh. Well, guess I'll stop being impressed with myself and get to work. Make for a nice change of pace."

"OK. You do that. I'll write up another story."

"Not mentioning that the deaths may be connected."

"I'd like to. But right now, Mr. Gaston, you're my best and almost only source."

"Maybe. But just one question."

"That being?"

"You've got a successful, available woman who looked reasonably attractive even with half the contents of her skull dripping onto the stairs. Shopping like that means she's into it. Living like that, house, canines as surrogate offspring, means she's aiming to stay single. Kind of person me and approximately 135 million other American men would like to date."

"Yes. I think I see what's coming."

"Why is it she doesn't go with anyone from the time Fontana dies?"

"Right. Good one."

"Why's she dressed up to get with someone at the time Fontana dies. And before you get cocky, I do know women aren't lounging around the house like that. Not so comfortable."

"Right."

"There's three possibilities. She's meeting someone else who doesn't have sex with her and kills her in the same way Fontana was killed. Possible, but not super likely. The four previous deaths would have needed to generate a whole lot more press."

"Right."

"Second is she's meeting someone who knows both her and Fontana, planning to have sex with him, and he kills her the same way he killed Fontana."

"Or she?"

"There weren't any women the other hookers remembered, right, Mary-Anne?"

"None that stood out. But they did get at least an occasional visitor of the same persuasion."

"I'm sure. And you no doubt checked thoroughly. But two taking off with a woman and getting killed in the

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same way as Fontana, Raphael and Bateman, and nobody sees it?"

"Right. OK."

"Third chance is she's thinking about her lost lover. How they, you know, were together or whatever. Get the impression that Fontana was into the nastier elements of the nasty."

"Yeah."

"And someone comes along and shoots her before she gets changed. But the problem with this one is:"

"Where's the dog?"

"Right. Where's the dog."

"So you're thinking..."

"That all of this is connected, and Fontana & Ms. Raphael must have really pissed somebody off."

"Right. OK. I'll buy it. Won't write about it yet, but I'll buy it. Call me when you talk to dog guardian?"

"Surely. See what you can find about Ms. Raphael's finances. Also Mr. Fontana's."

"God. Gaston. First streetwalkers, now banks and land deals."

"I know. I'm giving you all the sleaze. I did check out Calvert St. today."

"It's the same."

"That's what I discovered. Yes."

"Call me at six, please. I should have something."

"Will do. Bye Mary-Anne."

"Later, Gaston."

### *Thirty-Five*

I called Basker's sitter, Ms. Lupe, and set up an appointment to chat about the life and times of Ms. Raphael. Her apartment was in a building next to a bar that featured live dancing, guess it was convenient to have that second career option close at hand.

Basker greeted me when I knocked, big guy didn't hate me, always a plus. Ms. Lupe seemed ready to talk.

"What can you tell me about her? Were you two close?"

"Close? No. I don't think she gets that close — got that close with people."

"Were you like the help?"

"No. I don't think so. Just — you know, it's like the world she worked in, it wasn't the world she was real happy in. So she'd hang around with people like me."

"And you never saw her with Fontana?"

"Never — or at least, I don't think so. He was there at some art gatherings. Probably."

"He sculpt or something?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Do you sculpt?"

"Jewelry. Lots of jewelry. If you're seeing someone now I can show you my collection."

"Not in a relationship at the moment. But thanks."

"Don't mention it. I don't know how I can help you..."

"You already are. I'm trying to get a feel for Ms. Raphael's — Eve's, personal life. Her professional one's great, but that's not a world I'm all that comfortable in either. We're thinking that as many as five people have been killed by one person."

"Five?"

"Two prostitutes were murdered before Fontana. Same manner."

"Same gun?"

"Good question. But these days, every would-be psychopath knows you file down the barrel to change the ballistics, lawsuit to keep that information from spreading had the opposite effect. Or it was a common gun. Same method though. Anyway, did Eve ever tell you about herself? Walking Basker, hear the Eve story?"

"Some of it. Lost her husband a long time ago. They'd split up, but he died, some factory, she got insurance. His family hated her for that, so she moved to the city. I think she used to be a secretary or something, a waitress maybe."

"And she moved up?"

"Right. We got to talking about stocks and things. She had them."

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"OK. Yeah. Guess insurance payment 10–15 years ago would make you set if you knew what you were doing."

"Right. Basker always ate well. That's for sure."

"And then, what about other guys, she ever talk about those? Can't picture her taking Fontana or someone like him to an art opening."

"Which art opening? There's some you go to, people talk about you because you're with a person of the opposite sex."

"Yeah. OK. So was she..."

"No. She always had a guy with her. Usually someone with a lot of money. But no personality. She told me a story, about one of them, a man who offered to marry her. They didn't have to sleep together or anything. At least not for the first year. Until she got comfortable with it."

"Dude — sorry, I'm mentally smacking someone."

"Well if it makes you feel better. She didn't go through with it. I would have."

"Got to get dog food."

"Right."

"But you don't have insurance from a deceased husband."

"You got it. If you want to be my husband, we can tell them you're dead, we'll split it up."

"I'll think about it."

"OK. Well there's time."

"Right. And Mr. Fontana, where does he come in?"

"Well, at least you got the impression, back when he was alive, that he was, you know, alive. Eve did tell me one time, this guy, said he was, you know, 'the right guy.'"

"But..."

"But she blew it. I think she started going out with someone else who'd been stalking her."

"Well, that's different. Not the right guy part. Heard that one. Stalker thing's a new twist. Actually the right guy element is a big part of my plan to fail both locally and abroad."

"Why's that?"

"Well, I was 'the right guy' that got away. Happened more than once. At first you take pride in it. You know, you'll make it big and they'll have to eat it."

"OK. Yeah, I can see that."

"But then I found out even the part-time cashier at the lake trout place has a right guy she missed."

"So?"

"So then I hatched my plan. You see, they'd all wonder what life might have been like, two divorces three kids forty pounds later, right? How it might have all been different?"

"Yeah. OK."

"And then one day they'd meet me by chance, and I'd be, I don't know, night manager at a Long John Silver's or something, having to talk down the irate custom who feel they got gipped by management's under-portioned fish fry."

"Right."

"So then, like, the woman I was right guy for, she'd have to deal with the fact that she didn't ever really know anybody who was going to make it. And her life was inevitable, me or the husbands she did take. I call that a win."

"Well, it's sort of, dark, you know."

"Yeah. But given a choice between getting ahead and getting even, you're always better getting even. Getting ahead just poses new problems."

"Never thought of it that way."

"And I haven't even gotten into the meetings. The more you move up, the more meetings you have. No meetings, man. Unless it's at the fish place, 'cause then I can scope out the new 14-year-old hostesses."

"Wow. Never heard that kind of plan from a grown man before."

"Secretly we all have it. I'm the only one who's living the dream. Anybody can be a successful business type. How many of us can underachieve in such a dynamic manner?"

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"OK. So, are you working for that kind of place now?"

"Not yet. Have to put on at least 30 pounds first. And get ready to listen to my 60-pounds-over boss telling me about his life. Every day. Once I've got that training out of the way, I'll be ready."

"OK. Scary."

"Yup. But back sort of on topic, you're thinking, she's going with all these zeroes, they know what to pick on a wine list, but they're not doing it for her."

"Right. That's about it."

"So she starts messing around with a youngun she meets by chance somewhere."

"Fontana wasn't that young, you know. I heard 33."

"Wow. OK. But he's still about 10 less than her."

"Right."

"Not a lot of future in that kind of thing."

"Probably not. But then, you do hear stories."

"Do they end with one party or another standing outside the window holding a radio that's blaring "And I Will Always Love You?"

"No. Haven't heard that ending."

"Too bad. I know one that ended that way. Cops came along and picked her up."

"OK. You know lots of strange people."

"Of course. You think they let just anybody be assistant night manager at a Long John Silver's? Got to know people."

"Right. Sure. OK. You're pretty strange, Mr. Gaston."

"I know. It's a gift. But did you see Ms. Raphael with any other faces? Folks who kept coming by?"

"Well, the man who offered to marry her is still around. He sits at the same bar she went to. I think he teaches somewhere. Major family money."

"Has to go somewhere. Really short guy too, right?"

"Yeah. I guess so. Why?"

"The ones with money who offer shit like that? They're never tall."

"I see."

"And they'll never make it to assistant night manager."

"Now here's my problem, Mr. Gaston. That sounds to me like a plan, thoroughly concocted. So even when you fail, you succeed. Doesn't that mean that deep down, you want to achieve, even at such a diminished level?"

"Ha ha ha. That's why I'm the reporter and you're the subject. After I earn their trust, I'll skim from the register until I get canned or jailed, whichever one attracts the most negative attention."

"So ya could never be thought of as the right guy."

"Exactly. Except if you're talking 14-year-old hostess."

"Another way to jail."

"Mm-hmm."

"You have an evil-sounding laugh."

"When you get to know me it's a lot of fun."

"I see. I'll think about it."

"So, for the record, Ms. Lupe, you cannot recall ever seeing Ms. Raphael and Mr. Fontana together."

"Nope. Not together."

"Not at the bar. Not in the house?"

"Not at the bar, not in the house, not with the dog, not with a mouse."

"I wanted to say that."

"You're losing your touch."

"That's OK. It'll be the first sign of decay, losing the touch. Pretty soon I'll be ready to make fish jokes."

"Well, don't fall apart just yet, Mr. Gaston. Come here and I'll see if I can't help you find your touch again."

"What about Basker?"

"Nothing Basker hasn't seen already. Dog's been around."

"OK, if you say so."

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"Now don't you fail on me either."

### *Thirty-Six*

Salvaging some of the afternoon, though unclear I'd call it wasted, I got in contact with the guy Ms. Lupe had mentioned. His family had that scary kind of Baltimore money, the sort that had lasted through the Depression and grown. Talking to him, I got to thinking about slothful minds, the way encountering them gives you the same recoil drive-thru booth jockeys get on touching soft hands when moving change.

Call him Mr. \$, 'cause lord knows there's somebody on his team who can sue, had indeed been acquainted with Ms. Raphael, had known her quite well, had once, his words "engaged in a proposition of marriage" to her.

The lady, even if she didn't have serious bucks, could have had them in a heartbeat, leave it to academics and others with excess free time to decide which kind of whoring is worse. Odds on she could have taken him no sweat.

My one good idea was shot. No great leads on Fontana's other girlfriend, and no idea whether the one doing the shooting was her, had killed her, would hope to kill her soon, or else had had left town.

Five deaths, no motive, nobody gained anything. And on the radio, some kind of hip band was coming to town, so the group was losing interest.

Feeling pretty much fucked, I put in an early call to Mary-Anne.

### *Thirty-Seven*

Luckily, the lady was understanding, though maybe that was because we weren't in person, so I couldn't catch her smirking.

"Yeah, thought you'd run into something like that, Gaston. Her records show her having pretty large balances, accounts running back several years. Had to sweet-talk folks into giving me them, let me tell you."

"I knew you'd be capable. So what did she have? Stocks, bonds, T-bills? Didn't lose it recently betting on Japan, right?"

"You know, she doesn't appear to have lost much. That's a given. Had money everywhere, brokerage accounts where they didn't let me through, bank accounts and money market where they did. There's also a lot of property. City rentals mostly."

"Knew she wasn't perfect. Slumlord?"

"So cynical. Not really. Some waterfront lots, areas marked for development, have her down as a member of a limited partnership or two. Then there's rowhouses on the south side. Only slum property is a warehouse over by the Hollins Market."

It couldn't be that easy. "Abandoned one across from the railroad museum by any chance, Mary-Anne?"

"I think so. Why?"

"Make good practice space, if you want to go and try out new stuff, don't you think? If a friend of yours was holding it for you."

"Or studio space..."

"For aspiring artists. One in particular that I'm looking for. Don't know if she's an artist, though. It's the corner of Pratt St. and Arlington, right?"

"Yeah. What? Old drinking place for you?"

"Not inside, though down the street is a wonderful old man bar, nightly crowd approximately six."

"OK. So what's so special about it?"

"From the roof, you've got a great view of downtown, no other skyscrapers blocking the way."

"Hmm. Sure. That all?"

"No. If you wanted to, you could turn around, see the crowds wandering around the market any time, day or night."

"OK. Fine."

"Mary-Anne, I'm losing faith in you for a change... could also watch your boyfriend's funeral from there, keep real close, but check out for anybody who might make fun.... or worse."

"I'm tied up here, or I'd go with you."

"That's cool. I'm on my way."

### *Thirty-Eight*

The entrance to the warehouse was locked, chained, and looking a little bit rusty, but seeing a few jutting

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bricks led up to a half-hanging fire escape ladder, I thought I knew where Fontana had developed his climbing skills. For a move up like that, all you've gotta remember is that it's pretty stupid, then consider yourself lucky when you reach the top.

I made it all the way to the roof, missing a second-story ledge I only found out about later, and caught a strange smell emanating from a broken skylight. Thinking the worst, I thought about how it might look better if I grabbed a couple of cops to wander in with, but as I did so some water-soaked structural thing gave way, and I fell through into a suprisingly soft combination of beer cans, pizza boxes and the odd brochure from a major metropolitan art house.

Something on a makeshift futon was giving off the odor. I'd found Fontana's girl.

### *Thirty-Nine*

Cops took it from there. I wasn't much hurt, but they weren't much happy. Only thing saved me was that she'd been dead at least a day and a half. The floors were littered with the usual collection of paintings, sculpture and nude seventies icon dolls for use in performance art. Nothing of value. Nobody'd gained anything.

Mary-Anne was covering the story for tomorrow's press. I tallied up six deaths, made a few phone calls, arranged a meeting.

### *Forty*

Branson met me inside the Gypsy. Joan had ventured off to the neighborhood's liquor store/bank for the sake of pretending there was money in her accounts, so apart from a few folks at the side bar, we were alone. He was smirking.

"You'd wanted to tell me before, didn't you? Kept the whole going just to find the right person to do the story?"

"Yeah. About right."

"It threw me for a while, you know? Not used to folks getting killed for anything besides love, money, or the last beer in the fridge. Pretty freaky setup, man."

"Yeah. Gonna make a topic for all the psychologists. Whoo-boy. Got a private room reserved at Supermax, you know all the cells there have windows, TV just a pouring in. I won't get the chair."

"I'm sure not. What's your take on the 'cause? The thing that set you off?"

"Oh man, anything. Jealousy. Envy. Rage just a pouring in. I had to have his life, and since I couldn't, he couldn't neither."

"And the prostitutes?"

"Man. You want to get to the show, you gotta practice."

"And Bateman?"

"Bateman was the class of his new band, man. Had to go to."

"And the ladies?"

"Fine tail Fontana was getting."

"Yeah, sounds good. Too bad I'm not buying it."

"What's that you say?"

"Well, I mean I'm sure you'd qualify as poster child for why suburbia just don't cut it for teen-rearing. But it was Ms. Raphael. You didn't plan to kill her, did you?"

"What?"

"I'm right, ain't I? You'd kind of known her through him. Friends almost. Go to her depressed. She's caring for you. But she doesn't dress like that to care for you. It's only a functionality device, am I right?"

"Hey man, I ain't gay. I mean, I am not gay. You gonna say I'm gay, I'll get a gun."

"Nah, 'course you're not. Gifted public speaker, you'd a come up to me first thing to go and shock me with your homosexuality. Apparently coming out's a ceremony now, once you heard that you probably thought of it, for the attention. You're just one of those funny guys who can do anything to a joke except think up a good one. She tried again, all dressed up, just to make you feel better, right?"

"Right -- no. Wasn't like that."

"She put the dog outside, puts on something special, all for you, but you're afraid of failing, so you shoot her when she's on the way back to catch you. Right?"

"No."

"And Fontana, he's your buddy, as long as he's fucked up. He's got talent, people respect him. But that's OK, if

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he keeps pissing it away, messing around with women not going to drive him to the top, you don't mind it. 'Cause you're there to make fun of him. But he finally puts it together, and you're even further behind."

"No."

"Yeah. It's you. How'd it happen, you're trashing his band and his women, like you trashed all his bands and all his women, and what, he looks at you, like he's seen through you, tells you other people say it's a hot sound and a good life? That about right?"

"No man. It wasn't like that."

"Oh I'm sorry, there was art to you knocking off hookers. Yeah, that was sheer poetry, Mr. Branson."

"No."

"Fucking loser. You were gonna make it to prime time 'cause people were gonna want to know the name of the killer, and how he worked. You can't do comedy, pal, you'll never be able to tackle the serious stuff."

"Man, I'm warning you."

"It's Jed. And by the way, fucked up about it is that, while getting so into your own asshole, you forgot two important things."

"Oh yeah, what's that? Just what the fuck is that?"

"Are they. They are that, if you'd ever left your little fat chick in a coffee house who only talks about how everybody else just isn't up to snuff act for a second, you'd've caught on that there's a Fontana in every goddamn town: talented, not quite making it, maybe going to put it all together some day, probably not. Nothing hot shit about this story unless you need to fill up space on a Sunday."

"And what's the other thing? Huh, smart guy? What else I forgot?"

"Oh. Yeah. The other thing you forgot is that Fontana used to work on the same crew as Porky. Off and on. Did it for a long time. Sam's gonna miss his crew member. Good ones are hard to find. That's why he makes sure anybody works for him, well, they're protected."

"What? Protected?"

"Folks got Fontana's back."

"You're not a killer."

"Just of your dreams, Branson. Just your fucked up dreams. There's some people in the next room have to talk to you. I'll see you."

"Wait. Wait...."

### *Forty-One*

And that was pretty much it. Cops got Branson's name from me, they spent 12–15 hours searching all over town, with TV cameras and Baltimore's one chopper unit close behind, only to discover that the recently bald, nearly-naked, very much unconscious guy they'd thrown into general lockup upon suspicions of perversion was in fact the man they sought. Gave Mary–Anne that part of the story, though not how he'd get there.

Branson didn't photograph as well as he thought he would. He apparently wasn't gonna confess after all, but a few of the hookers remembered him, and a gun in his apartment matched nicely to bullets taken.

Janice ended up getting forced out of her editor gig, right after she saw to it I was extremely underpaid for my work. Girl landed on her feet, latching on as deputy publisher with a Midwestern daily after an old ass she used to shove her nose in signed her. Press release cited "strong investigational management skills," whatever that means, as the reason for hiring.

Wasn't all bad though. On Janice's last day, I scored 20 bucks from Mary–Anne when it was proven Ms. J didn't even know the state her new city was a part of.

Arlington, VA, 1999.