

Flash
by
John McFetridge

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Who's Angie Dickinson

Seventy-three years old and the guy wanted to go again. Stacey looked at the clock radio beside the bed, seven twenty-seven p.m., and said, "In a minute, okay, let me catch my breath."

Frank said, "You do that," and watched her stand up and stretch. She started to walk towards the bathroom and he said, "Don't go far."

She said, "Don't worry," thinking, shit, I hope I'm doing the right thing.

In three minutes there'd be a knock at the door, she'd let a guy in and he'd shoot Frank Colucci. She'd get an extra grand on top of the five hundred Frank was paying – what he paid her every Thursday, same time, same hotel.

She looked in the bathroom mirror, the lines on her face in the bright fluorescent light. A couple years past thirty, shit, she couldn't believe she was still doing this. Well, really she pretty much wasn't. Frank and maybe two or three tricks a week, barely paying the rent. Someday she'd get out, she always said that, hell, everybody says that, but pretty soon Frank would want some seventeen year old Romanian chick, the only English she'd know would be, "Greek okay." Then Stacey figured she'd have nothing.

But that didn't really seem like Frank's style. Sometimes she thought she only stayed in it this long because of him, sweet old guy, said she reminded him of Angie Dickinson. Stacey had no idea who that was, had to ask Summer, the chick she bought her weed from. Looked her up on the IMDb, Summer said she was in a cop show in the 70's, but Stacey looked at the laptop screen and said, Frank's probably thinking about the movie with Sinatra.

Then there was the knock on the door, quiet.

She looked at her purse on the little suitcase table in the closet with no door across from the bathroom. Still naked, she opened the door.

The guy was maybe thirty-five, wearing a sweater, jeans and a leather jacket. He looked her up and down, then walked past her into the hotel room like she was the maid.

She heard Frank say, "What the fuck," and the guy said, "Yeah."

Frank said, "They sent you?"

The guy said, yeah, "They sent me." He pulled the gun out of the pocket of his leather jacket.

Stacey shot him in the back. He started to turn as he fell and she shot him two more times, the gun making a pop, pop sound, barely as loud as the TV.

Frank was out of bed and coming towards her, saying, "You see?"

She said, yeah. "Easy." She was standing there naked, feet wide apart, holding the gun in both hands.

Frank was looking good, looking fit and ready to go. He said, "Wipe that down and leave it in the bathroom, drop it in the toilet."

She went into the bathroom saying, "Was it who you thought it would be?" and started wiping the gun with a towel.

In the room Frank was getting dressed, saying, no, it wasn't my first guess.

Stacey watched the gun splash into the toilet, the gun Frank had given her when she told him about the phone call, the guy who said to make sure the old fucker was in bed and open the door at exactly seven-thirty.

Then Frank was at the bathroom door saying, "Now I know how they knew about you, though," and Stacey said, "Good."

She was glad Frank knew she really didn't have anything to do with it. She really did like him. Now she was sure telling him was the right thing.

He said, "Come on, get dressed, we'll get some dinner."

Stacey smiled and said, "Sure," thinking this guy's got quite a few years left in him, he's not going to quit till he's ready, just like Sinatra.

She figured she could be his Angie Dickinson.



Overtime

Twenty-three year old RCMP Constable Evelyn Edwards pulled off the highway and drove along the dirt road through the woods for a few miles, stopped behind another cruiser, got out and said, hey, to LaPierre who was leaning against the trunk smoking a cigarette. Edwards said, “Should we wait for Sergeant Bouchard and the rest of them?” and LaPierre said, come on, two of us can take him.

Edwards said, “We’re supposed to wait for the rest.” She didn’t really know LaPierre, he was maybe five years older than she was, five more years of doing this shit in rural New Brunswick, and she didn’t want to come off scared. Even if she was.

LaPierre said, “Call said there was only one shot, maybe he killed himself.”

“That sound like Noel Tremblay?”

LaPierre said, “Don’t believe everything you hear.” They both got into his cruiser and drove down the dirt road to the Tremblay place, LaPierre telling Edwards that Noel had been back in New Brunswick less than a year, back from working the dope fields in BC, bringing some nice harvests back east and selling it mostly in Maine, maybe as far south as Boston. “At least that’s what we think. Noel moving up in the world since we used to bust him for beating the crap out of guys in town and the couple dozen plants he grew on his mother’s property. After she died he closed up the old homestead and went west.”

The dirt road turned a few times, they couldn’t see the house till they were close to it, Edwards saying it was like it was made for hiding out and LaPierre saying the old man was a moonshiner, or it might’ve been the grandfather. “Been the family business a long time.”

Edwards said, “Holy shit,” when the headlights came around on a Lexus, the driver’s door open and a body slumped over it.

The two cops got out of their car, LaPierre saying, “Noel? You here?”

Edwards said, “Whoever this is, looks like he got hit from behind, blew a whole right through him.”

Lights were on in the house, TV playing, sounded like a hockey game.

LaPierre said, "Quebec plates on the Lexus."

"The Saints think they run all the drug business down here."

"They don't know nobody runs Noel Tremblay."

Closer to the house they could hear the TV, Bob Cole's voice excited about everything. Well, it was April, playoffs.

LaPierre walked up the stairs slow, his .38 in his hand. He said, "Noel? You here?"

When he got to the front door he pushed it open a little and saw Noel Tremblay sitting on the couch watching the game. LaPierre said, "Noel?"

Noel jumped, looked over, the shotgun on the couch beside him, saying, "Shit, you scare me. Come on in, you want a beer?" He pointed towards the kitchen.

LaPierre said, no, that was okay, he was working. "Somebody called, said they heard a shotgun."

"Oh shit, yeah," Noel said. "That asshole from Montreal, sorry about that. I'm gonna bury him with the other one, but that fucking Swedish fag Koivu scored, now it's over time."

LaPierre looked at Edwards, then back to Noel and said, "He's Finnish."

Noel said, "What?"

"Saku Koivu, he's not Swedish, he's from Finland."

"Who gives a shit," Noel said. "He fucking scored, ten seconds to go, should have known the fucken Bruins would blow it."

"Yeah," LaPierre said, "but it's only game five."

Noel turned on the couch, looked at the two cops in his door and said, "They lose tonight they have to go back to Montreal, they'll fucking lose there for sure."

LaPierre said, "Noel, who's the guy you shot?"

Looking back to the TV Noel said, "Asshole thinks I still work for him. I told him I quit his fucken dope business. I only work for myself."

"He came looking for the other one?"

"Fag came last week, driving a Dodge Ram, you can believe it. Practically brand new. I stripped it for parts, I'm putting the engine in my pick-up."

"And you buried him here?"

Noel looked up, looked upset for the first time, saying, "Not on the hill with Ma, that's what you're thinking."

"Noel, we're going to have to arrest you."

He stood up, said, what? "The fuck you arresting me for? For killing these assholes been criminals their whole fucken lives? Dope dealing kiddie-fucken bad guys? The world's better off without them."

"But you can't just shoot them, Noel."

"Sure I can, I just did."

On TV Bob Cole screamed and Noel swung around to look but it was off the post and cleared

out. "Jesus Christ," Noel said. "Fucken Bruins. Look you want a beer? You can help me bury that asshole when the game's over."

LaPierre looked at Edwards and she shrugged. Might as well wait till the game ended, arrest Noel then.

Maybe the fucken Bruins could still win this one.



PLUGGED

Summer had seen bigger dildos.

Josh was carefully pouring the off-white powder into it, saying, “It started out as a plant, a green leaf, in South America. Somebody down there dried it out and put it through a chemical process with sulphuric acid to make raw cocaine, cocaine sulfate. That was a paste.”

He had the dildo completely filled, didn’t spill any, and put a top on it, like a cork, the same dull pink as the rest of it. “Then it goes through another process, this time with hydrochloric acid and that makes it cocaine hydrochloride. Your basic cocaine. Water soluble, suitable for snorting or injecting.”

He put some cotton tape around the seal, dropped the dildo on the desk and said, “You might want to use a condom over that,” and looked up at her. “Or two.”

Summer didn’t say anything, she just watched him work. This nerdy looking guy in his late twenties, glasses, short hair, clean tee shirt. They were in his basement in the suburbs. Emma drove Summer out in her Prelude and waited in the car. This was Summer’s gig.

He picked up a black thing with a rounded, almost pointed end, fat in the middle tapered off on the other end to what looked like a handle a few inches across.

Summer said, “Is that...?”

Josh said, yeah, “A butt plug. You never used one?”

“No.”

She watched him kind of shrug and pull the handle, pulling the thing into two and start to fill it with the white powder, saying, “Then this gets refined further in one of two different ways to produce either freebase or crack. Freebase is made with ammonia and ether, which get rid of all the impurities leaving only pure freebase.” He finished filling the plug and pushed the end with the handle back in. “This process is extremely dangerous, which is why freebase is more expensive and less widely available.”

He dropped the black plug next to the pink dildo on the desk and looked at Summer. “This,” he said, “will be turned into a safer kind of freebase called crack. It makes a kind of a crackling sound when heated.” He shrugged again and said, “Your basic druggies, not all that creative.”

No, Summer thought, not like you. She said, “What’s with the handle on that plug, it has to stick out?”

Josh lifted up the dildo and said, “Your vagina is only so long, you can put this in and pull it out, just like your tampon.” He put it back on the desk and picked up the butt plug, saying, “Your anus on the other hand, is just the end of your intestine, it’s, like, twenty-five feet long, winding its way to your stomach. Stuff usually comes out that way, but if you put something in – as many people do, it turns out – it can keep going and get lost in there. Hence the little handle. No one will see it under those jeans.”

Summer said, okay, I get it and picked up the dildo and butt plug, surprised by how heavy they were.

Josh started putting the rest of the coke – pounds and pounds of it – back into the backpack he had gotten it out of, saying, “So, you take that sample to Spaz, he’ll test it, see how fucking great it is, what great crack it’ll make, and buy the rest.”

Summer said, okay. She put the dildo and the plug back on the desk and started going through her purse, a big shoulder bag that looked like it was made out of old movie posters.

Josh said, “Good, you got lube? You might want to use some, before you shove that up your ass.”

Summer lifted the Berreta nine mil out of her purse and shot Josh in the forehead. He fell over backwards, the blood spilling out of his head like a faucet.

She dropped the dildo and the plug into the backpack, hefted it over one shoulder and walked out, saying, “Shove it up your own ass.”



Driven to Distraction

Summer couldn't believe they put the fucking gag in her mouth. The zip cuffs were bad enough. Then they were lifting out of her own SUV, her brand new Toyota FJ and she figured, well, you steal that much cocaine from a guy, you better make the double-cross look real.

Garry lifted her shoulders and Boner had her by the feet and they dropped her on the cement floor of the garage. They didn't look at her and she thought, good, don't screw it up now.

Mick came through the door to the house, saw her and said, "Where'd you snatch her, the fucking pool?"

The bikini was Summer's idea, make her look totally helpless, maybe distract him. She didn't think it would work on Mick, but here he was, looking at her tits and her long smooth legs, saying, "You think there's any hair on her at all?" and fucking Gary saying, "We can find out."

Mick turned his back to her then and said, "So, she did this all by herself?" Got right to it. She watched Gary and Boner both back away, Mick walking towards them, holding out his hands, trying to look like a reasonable guy in his golf shirt and Dockers.

Summer rolled on the cold cement, got a little closer to her FJ.

Gary said, "Yeah, she did it, you know that."

"Tell me."

"Well, shit, you sent her, she went to Josh's, she was supposed to get a sample, take it to Spaz, drive right over the fucking bridge to Canada, show him what we got."

"But that's not what happened," Mick said.

They were all the way on the other side of the garage now, twenty, thirty feet at least, so none of them noticed her stand up, her back to the open trunk of the FJ. The scissors were right there and she cut the zip cuff.

Gary was saying, no, that's not what happened. "She killed fucking Josh and took the whole stash."

"Twenty kilos," Mick said.

Summer thought, yeah, almost sixty pounds. Guy had it in a backpack. She reached into the bag

and took out her Berreta nine mil.

Mick said, "But what was she going to do with it all on her own? Fifteen grand a kilo, who does she know can come up with three hundred grand?"

Boner saw it. He always was a little smarter. Gary said, "Who knows what she's thinking, bitch," which she thought was selling it too much.

Boner said, "No way, it wasn't like that," and Mick said, no? "What was it like?"

Gary was starting to panic, she could tell, thinking why didn't it happen yet and then he saw Summer raising the gun, holding it in both hands aiming at Mick and he smiled. He said, "What the fuck, yeah, she stole it. We stole it. We're selling it to Spaz, just like you planned, we're just getting rid of you."

Mick said, "I knew you little fucks were too ambitious."

"Hey," Gary said. "It was really her," and nodded towards Summer coming up behind Mick.

She squeezed the trigger and hit Gary in the chest. Mick had his Colt out and he shot Boner. Then he turned around and looked at Summer and said, "You were right, they're not exactly loyal."

She said, "A guy in your position, needs to know where his men stand."

"Did you even have to talk them into it?"

"I told you," Summer said. "They came to me with this."

"Shit." He looked at the dead bodies, the blood flowing out of their chests and into the drain in the middle of the cement floor. "Come on, Emma's here, you can take that bikini off, get in the hot tub."

Summer said, "I know," and Mick said, "You do?" and Summer said, yeah, and then she shot him. He said, "What the fuck?" and she shot him again.

Then Emma was standing in the door to the house tossing a bag to Summer, saying, "You should get dressed, we have to be at Spaz's in an hour. Can't cross the border like that."

And Summer said, "You sure? Makes a good distraction."



THE BOOK CLUB

Rachel Zambri knew she'd have to tell her husband, Randy, that her book club had kind of turned into armed robbery and when she did, he said, "Kind of?"

She said, yeah, kind of. They were in their basement, Randy was finishing it, putting up drywall and raising the floor a couple inches off the cement and putting down carpeting. He'd already installed the new 54 inch flat screen and the new surround sound was in, but the speaker wires were still all over the place. They'd just watched Casino Royale and Rachel was ready to tell him, but they made out first, sitting on the couch, Randy still facing the TV and Rachel sitting on his lap, facing him, grinding.

When they were finished she slid off and curled up beside him, stroking his chest, glad the kids hadn't woken up, and told him that the book club had stopped meeting and she and Cheryl Taugher had started robbing people.

Randy said, "I was wondering, you know, we haven't had any money troubles lately."

"We get maybe a thousand, fifteen hundred a week," Rachel said. "It's not much, split two ways, but it makes a big difference around here."

"It sure does."

Then she told him how just having a little extra cash in her purse took a lot of the pressure off. They went to sign up Kayla and Dylan for soccer, she just wrote the check, not worried. "Look, we're going over budget on the basement, it's not such a big deal."

"Brand new house," Randy said, "and it's falling apart. I had to waterproof the whole place, put in more insulation before I could start the dry wall."

Rachel touched his chest, moved her fingers over his arms, saying, "I always feel like it's my fault, I wanted to move into this crappy subdivision."

"It's okay," Randy said. "It's getting better."

"It is." She hugged him tight, then said, "So, in the book club, Monica brought this stupid book, some college chick working as a stripper in Minnesota. Lots of talk, no action, you'd say."

"I would?"

She tickled him and he pushed her hand away but then he pulled it back.

"And, you know, we drank wine and talked about the book for ten minutes and then it was just

gossip.”

“That’s what a book club is.”

Rachel said, yeah. “All us chicks trying to sound educated. Anyway, Cheryl said what she noticed about the book, the thing that really stood out, was how much cash changed hands.”

“Strip clubs,” Randy said, “biggest rip offs.”

“I know, you said you wanted a blow job you’d pay the massage parlour chick the sixty bucks.”

“If I’m not getting it at home...”

“So Cheryl, she came up with the idea. She said, you know, banks these days they don’t have any money, gas stations never have more than fifty bucks.”

“But strip clubs?”

“Not the clubs, the guys. She came up with this idea, we stand outside as they’re going in. She does it, really.”

“Being the single Mom on the make, she knows the moves.”

“Moves, right. Well, she knew what MILF meant, I didn’t even know that.”

Randy squeezed her breasts, pinched the nipple a little, said, “Right.”

“So, Cheryl looked online, we picked the Club International out by the airport, it has a big parking lot, nothing around. She put on her leather mini and stood near the door.”

“Halter top?”

“Tight silk blouse, unbuttoned halfway. She waited till a guy came by himself, looked ready, and she said to him, how about a quick blowjob before you go in?”

Randy smiled, said, I can hear her saying it, the same voice she uses on me when she picks up Kevin from the play dates and Rachel said yeah, but lower. “Working on the husky voice. She says to the guy, when you go in you don’t want it to be over too soon, and he said, yeah okay, good idea. He was probably forty-five or fifty, not bad looking.”

“That matter?”

“She brings him back to the Caravan.”

“Wait, you use our van?”

“She gets in the middle seat, behind the driver’s, gets down on her knees on the floor, had a porno playing on the DVD, she tells the guy, come on, let’s see it. The guy, he thought she meant his dick, he starts undoing his pants and Cheryl says, no, honey, the money.”

“You’re in the front seat, the driver’s?”

“Standing outside the door, he thinks Cheryl’s alone. His pants are half open, he gets his wallet out, starts to get out some cash, Cheryl points the gun in his face, says, thanks honey, I’ll just take it all.”

“The gun?”

“She got it at that toy warehouse, the one on Dufferin. Dylan wants one.”

“Oh yeah, looks like a Colt, a .38. It’s a water pistol?”

“You take out the squirter, it looks just like the barrel of a gun. Especially in the dark, in the back of a Dodge Caravan in a strip club parking lot.”

“Your pants down, some chick shoving it in your face.”

“Guy handed her the wallet, she actually took the cash out, handed it back and said, okay, get going and shoved him out. I opened the door, hopped in and drove away.”

“How much the guy have?”

“Six hundred bucks.”

“You see,” Randy said. “Strip clubs are such a rip off, guy would have spent six hundred bucks on watered down booze and lap dances, probably jerk himself off on the way home.”

“So, we’re doing three or four a night, some massage parlours, too, instead of talking about Oprah’s books.”

Randy said, shit, that’s something. “Well,” he looked around the basement and then at Rachel and said, “I guess we can finish this place good, get that beer fridge, and the xbox for Dylan.”





Casino Rock

Sitting in the parking lot looking straight ahead Teddy could see the Rainbow Bridge, traffic lined up at customs and New York state on the other side. Looking in the side mirror he could see the skinny guy with the long hair carrying the big rectangular guitar case coming from the casino and he thought, what an asshole.

He watched the guy come up behind the Escalade and look around like he was in a fucking movie, somebody might be following him before he looked in the passenger window and Teddy pressed the button unlocking the door.

The guy got in, dragging the guitar case up on his lap, saying, “Shit, it’s cold. Is it always so wet?”

“The falls are right there,” Teddy said, “if you want to see them.”

“That’s okay.”

A million tourists looking over Niagara Falls a year and this guy doesn’t want to walk fifty feet to see them. “Okay,” Teddy said, “let me see it.”

The guy said, yeah sure, course, and opened up the case. Just like he’d said, a white Flying V.

Teddy said, “I’ll give you five hundred.”

“It’s worth three grand, it’s vintage.”

Teddy said, yeah, if it was Johnny Winters’, “But it’s not. Five hundred.”

“I played with Johnny. And Edgar. We opened for them in `76, I was just a kid.”

Teddy thought the guy looked familiar, tried to picture him before the million miles on the road, the groupies, the drugs and the booze. He thought maybe if he knew one of the guy’s songs.

“Grand Funk that summer, Ted Nugent, too, you know *Cat Scratch Fever*? We opened for Alice Cooper and Bowie, man.”

Teddy was thinking, yeah, but what’s one of *your* songs? He said, “I can give you a grand.”

The guy said, okay, and closed the case.

Teddy flipped open his cell phone, hit a button and said, “Grand.” Then he said, “What’s your band called, The Sky?”

“The High. I guess you weren’t at the show.”

Teddy said, was anybody? and the guy said, yeah, man, “We do okay on the casino circuit.”

“Just not quite good enough.”

The guy said, "Blackjack, it's my weakness," and Teddy thought, yeah, among others.

"Okay, you go back to the casino, somebody'll meet you."

"You don't have the money?"

"The way it works, pal. There's fucking cops everywhere."

"It's against the law to sell you a guitar?"

"We're full service. Cheque cashing, pay day loans and mobile pawn shop. Buy a lot pink slips, I could open a car lot."

The guy said, "Shit," and opened the door. Teddy could tell the guy didn't like being lumped in with all those pathetic losers gambling their lives away, but really, what did he think he was, an artist?

Barry stood by the door to the Fallsview Casino smoking a cigarette and watching Curtis get out of the Escalade and walk through the parking lot. When he was between a mini van and a pick-up a short guy stepped in front of him and it was like they just barely bumped, Curtis didn't even slow down slipping the envelope inside his leather jacket. Barry dropped his smoke and followed the short guy to a Lexus, coming up behind him close and saying, "Hey, buddy."

The short guy turned around, saying, what, and seeing at the Glock in his face.

Barry held out a grocery bag and said, "Put it all in here."

The short guy said, "You don't know what the fuck you're doing," and Barry said, "All of it."

"You'll never make it out of the fucking casino."

In the tour bus Curtis said, "He recognize you?" and Barry said, "I could have been wearing the make-up, he wouldn't have known who I was."

Curtis said, yeah, of course. Still he was pissed. The High had one of the biggest selling albums in seventy-eight, it was just too late, the end of an era. No more glam, no more glitter; Aladdin Sane said Let's Dance, Alice lost the snake, went into rehab, even KISS were unmasked. The High just couldn't make the change.

Barry said, "Holy shit, looks like thirty grand. Add that to what we made last night on stage, this casino rock is working out, man. Glad you put the band back together."

Curtis said yeah. Ripping off the shylocks wasn't the real plan, but if it kept them going, kept them out on stage, kept the band together it, was worth it.



ENCORE

Locked in the trunk of the car, pitch black, Curtis was thinking, fuck, a number two hit in '78, would have been number one if it wasn't for disco and the fucking Bee Gees, and I'm going out the answer to a trivia question – what rock star was shot in the head?

Well, after Lennon, of course, but it's not like The High had crazed fans. Didn't some speed metal guitarist get shot right on stage by a crazed fan?

Curtis thinking that would be cool. Better than because he tried to rob the fucking shylock working the parking lot of the Greektown Casino in Detroit. Shit.

Sam Cooke, too, shot in the head by a jealous husband, but Curtis also heard it was because he refused to sing "When a Man Loves a Woman" and the chick shot him.

Not even a plane crash like Lynyrd Skynyrd and Ozzie's man Randy Rhoades, Richie Valens, Buddy Holly, Jim Croce, John Denver – shit, Curtis remembered playing that big festival in Colorado in '79, John Denver smiling and waving, so happy to be a country boy, nobody seeing what he was like backstage, asshole -- or Otis Redding, Otis crashing before "Dock of the Bay" was even released. Marc Bolan would have been remembered for a lot more than "Bang a Gong" if his girlfriend hadn't wrapped her Mini around the old oak tree with him in it. Half the Allman Brothers Band in motorcycle accidents.

But no, fuck, he was after a lousy ten grand, trying to pass a bogus cheque, and a small-time shylock was going to finish him. Not a proper rock star death, not a sex and drugs and rock'n'roll send-off like Jimi or Morrison or Keith Moon or Bonham or on and on, not even choking on vomit or Freddie Mercury fucking himself to death or blowing off his own head like Cobain.

Marvin Gaye, he was shot, too, but it was by his father, that was just weird.

Well, fuck it, Curtis wasn't going to beg for his life. The shylock had no idea who he was, screw him. Curtis tried to tell him, tried to get him to understand he was clearing ten grand for singing "Honey Trap" to drunken, methed-out zombies handing their hard earned money over to blackjack dealers and slot machines, but no, the asshole said he'd had enough.

Yeah well, Curtis had enough, too. Dragging his ass out on the road again after all these years, sure it was a blast, sure the little blue pills meant he could get with the groupies again – even if they

were mostly old chicks, tattoos sagging so he couldn't tell what they were – sure knocking off a shylock at every casino made it almost profitable, he still wasn't going to wet his pants and cry. He played fucking Live Aid in '85, toured with the Stones across Canada, was sharing the bill with the fucking Doobie Brothers, Grand Funk and Ted Nugent, cat scratch fever in every casino on the tour.

He was pretty sure some guy from Earth, Wind and Fire was murdered, too, and one of Booker T and the MG's, probably one of the black guys but he didn't know that for sure. And all those fucking rappers, shooting each other all the time.

Fuck it. It wasn't right. Not a rock star death, not drinking himself to death like Janis or Bon Scott. It was better than a Beach Boy drowning, the fucking irony. Brian Jones drowned too, but Curtis was pretty sure he was high or drunk or both.

The trunk opened and Curtis closed his eyes. They were wet. So were his pants.

Barry, been playing bass in the same bands as Curtis since they were kids watching the Midnight Special on TV in their parents' basements, said, "Come on, let's go, we're on in five."

Curtis climbed out of the trunk, saw the shylock face down on the pavement, a guitar strap around his neck, said, "Shit, you never seen any CSI shows, you better get that," and Barry said, don't worry about it.

"It's Nugent's."



In the Harbour

Gary Wilkes was standing on the deck of his brother-in-law's lobster boat stacking the traps and running lines when he saw the black Hummer driving down to the dock. Gary's brother-in-law, Alvin, decent guy and they loved him for marrying Annabelle, saw it too and said, "Not exactly sneaking up," and Gary said, no, they want us to see, "Supposed to scare the shit out of us."

Alvin said, yeah, well, it's what they do, and went below.

Gary watched the Hummer stop and the two guys get out; early thirties, jeans and tee shirts, sunglasses and leather jackets, of course. They looked up and down the dock, a dozen boats, fishermen all minding their own business, and came up to Alvin's, looking right at Gary.

One guy took off his sunglasses and said, "Didn't waste any time, you right back at work." French accent, they were from Montreal, Gary knew. Came all the way down to Shediac, New Brunswick just to talk to him.

Gary said, "Get the fuck off the dock."

They looked at each other like he'd made a joke, like they were gonna laugh, but instead they came on the boat. The one that was taller than Gary said, "We gonna talk."

They probably didn't even know it, these two thugs, but that's how this started for Gary, talking to some guy from Montreal. Gary had his own boat then, took over his father's when the old man's cancer moved into his bones and he was done. Had two cousins working for him, that was three families counting on him; three men, three women, seven kids and Gabrielle was pregnant again. And no fucking lobsters, or not nearly enough. Every season another guy lost his boat, lost his family, lost his will.

And Gary met this guy from Montreal, knew he was a biker right away. They don't ride bikes anymore, they're not about freedom and rebellion and the open road, no shit, it's all business now. Now they drive Hummers. The guy Gary met had a plan. They were bringing coke up from Columbia and they were going to pack it in lobster traps, dump them in the water right off the coast and lobster fishermen would pick them up along with their other traps. The guy said to Gary, "You ever bring up a trap worth twenty grand?"

Of course they got busted. Started in Montreal, big organized crime investigation, surveillance, wire taps, they even had an informer, led all the way to Shediac and Gary's boat. He was the one actually picked up with the coke in his hands.

Cop, local mountie out of Moncton, said to him, "These fucking federal lawyers are going to pressure you to give up names, but they won't protect you for shit after." One maritimer looking out for another.

Gary said, hey, I did the fucking crime, "I'll do the time." He gave them everything he had, names, dates, amounts in every shipment. All the money he made was in his boat, refitted engine, new navigation system, new traps. He was a couple months away from actually breaking even with just the lobsters, three families not going broke. They seized his boat, sold it at auction for a quarter of what it was worth to some guy from Cape Breton.

Now the tall one was saying, "You think this is done? You think you give up that many people, do two years in slam and it's over?"

"It's over for me."

Two years in Dorchester Federal Penitentiary and now he was thankful to be crewing on Alvin's boat, thankful his little sister Annabelle made her husband hire him.

But the bigshots in the deal, the top guys in Montreal, they were just coming up to trial now. Their rich fucking mob lawyers using every trick they had to delay it, to stall, question every piece of evidence, get to every witness, but now it was going to happen. And Gary was going to testify.

The short one opened his mouth for the first time, saying, "Don't be so fucking stupid. It's too easy for accidents to happen on boats."

Gary said, yeah, "They happen all the time."

The two bikers from Montreal staring at him, giving him their evil eyes.

Gary threw the trap he was holding, hit the tall one right in the face, staggered him back.

The short one was pulling a gun out of his belt and Alvin punched him the face, two, three times. Gary was on the tall one, spun him around, grabbed his greasy hair and smashed his face onto the rail, blood splattering everywhere.

Alvin had the short one's gun and was smacking him with it, the guy was holding his arms over his head so Alvin kicked him in the balls, steel toes doing their job.

Gary grabbed the tall one by the belt and threw him off the boat and Alvin ran the small one over the side, the two assholes landing on the dock ten feet from their shiny Hummer. They stood up, legs shaking like they were standing on the deck in a storm, blood all over their faces, and tried to look tough. It was almost funny.

Gary looked down and said, "The next time I throw you off a fucking boat, it'll be two miles out," and he pointed at the north Atlantic.

Alvin was pointing the short one's gun at them.

And up and down the dock, every other boat had two or three guys standing on deck holding something; pick axes, wrenches, big fucking knives.

The short one managed to say, “You’re fucking dead,” and pointed at Gary, but he got in the Hummer fast and they drove out like they were being chased.

Alvin looked at the trap that Gary threw at the tall one and said, “You have to fix that again?”

Gary said, no. “I was just starting that one, hadn’t done anything to it yet.”

“Okay.”

Gary looked up and down the dock. Everybody else was back to work, too.



The One-Percenter

Costa Rica - 1990

Stacey picked up her clothes and took her backpack into the bathroom. She had one pair of clean panties but she'd have to put on the same bra. Again. Tee shirt, denim skirt, hair in a pony tail, she'd look like someone who'd get searched at the airport. Great.

She pulled the rest of her clothes out of the backpack and felt the kilo of coke. She had two dozen condoms. Well, twenty-one, they'd used three last night. The guy was all right, Richard something, very laid back when she'd met him in the beach bar in Jaco, but a lot of energy in bed. He was maybe ten years older than Stacey, pushing forty like she was pushing thirty and he had a French accent. They'd come back to his hotel, Villa Caletis, just up the coast.

Now Stacey was thinking if she could get the coke into the condoms, shove them up her ass – no, swallow them, yeah, get past security and onto a flight, get past customs in New York, her only problem would be not getting ripped off or selling to a cop.

Yeah, if she could get out of Costa Rica without Tommy finding her and slicing her open to get it back.

She sat down on the toilet and took a piss, saying to herself, okay, there's a few kinks in the plan, but what do you expect, something you just came up with spur of the moment like that.

She heard Richard say, "Hey, honey," and she said, just a minute, I'm getting dressed and he said, "Don't do that, come back to bed, I'm ready." She stood up, put the clothes back on top of the coke and thought, okay, he was good, she'd give him that. It seemed like a good idea last night – another one of her good ideas – coming back to the hotel with this guy. A place Tommy'd never find her, give her a chance to think. She'd thought maybe this guy could help her, she could hang out with him a couple days then get to San Jose, get a flight to New York. This Richard, he seemed so touristy, but now she thought about it, he wasn't in any rush and he was sure confident. She slapped herself, thinking, shit, Stacey, always with the Daddy-complex you, but then she thought, no, this guy was different. For one thing his chest was covered in tattoos, old ones, stuff she didn't recognize. Right over his heart was a skull with devil horns and flames and under that a fleur de lys with "1%" in it and when she was sitting on him, riding him, and she'd asked him what it meant, he'd said, don't ask.

Now she wasn't sure what he was.

She ripped a condom off the strip and walked out of the bathroom.

He was ready all right. Lying on his back in the middle of the bed, naked, his dick standing right up, hands behind his head. He said, "Nothing like a good fuck to start the day."

Stacey said, "Yeah," and she was thinking, okay, this Richard might not be able to help, her but he could sure take her mind off her problems. She thought maybe she should go get another condom

right now, be ready, so like last night she could get up on her knees. He never slapped her ass or tried to slip it in the back door, just rode her till she came.

Then somebody knocked on the door hard, bang, bang, bang, and said, “Stacey, open the fucking door, you know what’s good for you.”

She said, “Shit,” and Richard said to her, “Who is it?”

“I’m really sorry I got you into this, honest, I’m sorry. I’m in some real trouble.”

Richard said, “Okay, never mind. Open the door.”

She said, “Yeah, okay,” but she was thinking, what the fuck? Past the bed there was the balcony they did it on last night, Richard sitting on the chair and Stacey straddling him, the moonlight off the tops of the rainforest all the way to the ocean. The hotel was only about a dozen rooms and now that she was looking for a way to take off, she started to think how expensive the place must be. It was on top of a cliff, a straight drop into the jungle.

She walked to the door and heard Richard getting out of the bed and thought, great, he’s gonna hide in the bathroom. She couldn’t figure this guy. As soon as she turned the knob, Tommy shoved the door open, knocking her on her ass.

“Okay, Stacey, where’s my fucking dope?”

She looked up at him and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Tommy reached under his silk Hawaiian shirt and took his Colt, the snub-nosed .38 from the waistband of his jeans, slapped her across the face and said, “My fucking coke, where is it?”

“I swear, I don’t know.” She closed her eyes ready for another smack and heard the punch. She looked up and saw Richard punching Tommy in the face. His other hand was holding Tommy’s wrist, pointing the gun at the ceiling, and he punched him a couple more times, then dragged him across the room, out onto the balcony and tossed him over.

Stacey stood up and watched this Richard coming back in and she noticed he was holding Tommy’s gun in his hand. She said, “We better get out of here,” and Richard said, “Relax, they’ll never find him down there, the jungle’s too thick, full of snakes and aligators and spiders big as fucking frisbees. They’ll pick him clean. That what all the condoms are for, you thinking of swallowing two pounds of coke?”

She said, “I hadn’t really thought it through. Why, you have a better idea?”

Richard stretched out on the bed and said, “Maybe if we put our heads together,” and Stacey thought, yeah, okay, can’t hurt.





Long Haul

When they finally got through Toronto, the 401 bumper to bumper for two hours, Ellen relaxed in the cab and said to Rick, “How long till we get to London,” and he said, “Why, you want to pull over for a quickie?”

She said, “You remember when we didn’t even pull over?”

Rick’d been driving long haul for almost thirty years, married to Ellen the whole time. Back in the beginning they rode together, popped in the Allman Brothers on the eight track and saw America. And Canada and a little of Mexico. Then they had the kids and she stayed home and raised them and Rick kept driving, both of them liking the idea of being independent, working for themselves, owning their own rig, being their own boss.

Now the kids were grown, Rebecca in the air force, Allan a state trooper and RJ in college going to be a teacher, and Ellen and Rick were back on the road having the retirement they’d be dreaming of all these years.

Except now it didn’t look like it was going to work out. With diesel prices rising, their plans had to change.

Rick said, “You nervous?”

“I should be, shouldn’t I? What we’re doing.”

“What else can we do? Got no choice.”

Ellen said, “Yeah.” Things had been getting tight for a while. They’d talked about selling the house but with the bottom falling out of that market they couldn’t get much for it. Rick’d been driving without health insurance for a couple of years now, sleeping in the cab for days at a time, cost too much to run the heater, waiting for a load that would at least cover the cost of hauling it.

In the parking lot of the Fifth Wheel in Dorchester, just outside of London, Ellen said, “Never seen Tommy’s rig like that,” and Rick, looking at the Western Star 4900 caked in dirt said, “Washes cost money.”

Walking into the almost empty drivers’ lounge Ellen said, “Wow,” and Rick said, “Yeah, like a neutron bomb.”

After Ellen said hi to Tommy and got introduced to the other drivers at the table she and Rick sat down and the guys – not all ‘guys,’ Alison and Rachel, too – were back in the middle of their talk. Their bitching. Grant saying, “It’s a matter of pride,” and Wayne saying, “Bullshit, it’s a matter of survival.”

“You know repossessions are up a hundred percent.”

Rachel said they got Ed Kirk’s last week, didn’t even have to chase him, it was sitting in his driveway. “Used to take the bastards weeks, months to get a hold of a rig.”

“When it was hauling.”

Grant said, “What can we do? No one’s building houses, there’s nothing to haul.”

“There’s plenty to haul,” Wayne said, “but with diesel over four bucks a gallon, there’s just no profit. The big fuckers, the nationals, buying it in bulk, paying way less, they can afford it. Drive the independents out of business.”

“You want to go on strike?”

“Right,” Wayne said, “that’ll work. Anyway, we’re an association of independent truckers, not a union, it’s against the law for us to strike.”

Grant said, shit, “We need Jimmy Hoffa back.”

Ellen looked at Rick, saw him laughing with his buddies, guys he’s known thirty years, but not looking as worried. Or not showing it.

“We need something,” Rachel said.

Ellen looked at her watch and said to Rick, “We better get going.”

Wayne said, “It’s not the romantic times you were hoping for, is it?”

“Worked your ass off for,” Grant said.

Ellen said, “We gotta do what we gotta do.”

They took the 402 up to Sarnia and got in line with the rest of the trucks crossing the Blue Water Bridge to Port Huron, Michigan.

Rick said, “Are you sure about this,” and Ellen said, “Yeah.”

Rick said, “We’ll be over in half an hour. You know there was a time there could be five, six thousand trucks a day cross this bridge.”

“Maybe we should’ve taken the Ambassador, gone stright into Detroit.”

“Hauling from Oshawa to Saginaw? That’s only a few hundred miles out of our way.”

“Does anyone check?”

Rick pulled up to the customs window and talked to the guy like he had ten thousand times before. Got waived through, drove under the radiation-sniffing portal, said to Ellen, “Spent fifty million bucks, looking for terrorists, nuclear weapons, dirty bombs.”

Just before Flint, Rick pulled off 69 onto 24 south towards Metamora, pulled over in a rest stop and Ellen made a cell call, saying, “We’re here.”

Ten minutes later a motorcycle pulled up a guy driving and a woman sitting behind him.

Ellen had already pulled the two backpacks, Transformers and Bratz, out from inside the

mattress in the sleeper – all those precautions seeming silly now, but you never know – and climbed out of the cab. Rick got out, too, walked up to the bike and said, “Nice Softail.”

The guy looked at Rick’s rig and said, “Nice Peterbilt, 386?”

“389.”

“Sweet.”

Ellen said, “They could talk like this all day,” and the woman, about Ellen’s age, took the backpacks and put them in the Harley’s saddlebags saying, “Boys and their toys.”

The guy told Rick he could get him a deal on a bike and Rick said they’d talk about that next time. The woman handed Ellen a FedEx envelope.

Driving away, Rick said to Ellen, “You met her online?”

“Website for Moms with kids in the military. Her son joined up two months ago, he’s going to Iraq next week.” Ellen pulled the twenty grand in cash out of the envelope, four bundles, 250 twenties in each.

Rick said, “That’s not a lot of time for training,” and Ellen said, “No, not much.” Then she said, “How long till Saginaw?”

“We’re doing fine,” Rick said. “Why, you want to pull over?”



TIGHT

Summer squeezed the tube of KY into the bowl, saying you'd think you'd lube up each condom on its own, but you don't. "You get it everywhere, a real mess. One of the first things I learned."

Bobbi watched, saying oh yeah, couldn't believe this chick was doing it right in front of her. She'd handed over the cash to Bobbi, somebody she'd never met before, in a motel room in San Jose, Costa Rica. Started pouring the coke into condoms right away, telling Bobbi she'd get over thirty grand for the kilo in T.O., and Bobbi said that was pretty good.

"Better than twenty in the States."

She squated like she was going to take a dump right there, already naked from the waist down, dipping a condom into the bowl, holding it by the knot she'd tied on the end. "This way you cover the whole thing with lube, but you don't get it anywhere else," and slid it up her ass.

Bobbi said, "You've done this before," and Summer said, oh yeah. "You like enemas?"

"Never had one."

"You never do anal? Make your man happy," and Bobbi said, no, never, and Summer said, "I used to give myself enemas all the time, keep my weight down for meets."

"You a cheerleader?"

Summer was sliding another condom up her ass and made a face, saying, "Gymnastics. I won a silver at state."

Bobbi said, oh yeah, and Summer said, yeah, sliding in the third condom saying, "But retail is different. You sell a gram in Canada you get maybe sixty bucks. In the States you get over a hundred," and Bobbi said, yeah, why's that, and Summer said, "Since the bikers took over coast to coast, the Saints of Hell, they control the wholesale market, tied it up tight." She pushed the last condom up her ass and said, "And I know tight."

Bobbi thought, shit, you don't know anything, watching her walk to the bed saying, "I'm glad we met, your prices are better than Mario's," pulling on a pair of white Joe Boxer Girlfriend briefs and picking up her flight attendant uniform skirt.

"You going to sell it wholesale in Toronto or drive to Buffalo?"

"You ever been to Buffalo? The retail hassle? No, I'll sell it in Toronto."

"Yeah, but to who?"

"I got a guy, he'll meet me at the airport. He can move a lot." She had her comfortable shoes on then, packed up her supplies, her condoms, another tube of KY, a pink vibrator and dropped them all on

top of the clothes in her carry-on, saying, "You get a guy at customs, he's so freaked seeing the vibe he just waves you through."

"What about a woman?"

"She's usually understanding."

Bobbi said she could drive her to the airport and Summer said the hotel would be better, she'd catch the shuttle, "With the rest of the crew."

"Anybody else carry?"

Summer said not yet. There were a couple of chicks she was going to ask, and a couple of guys, "Fags. They know how to handle the lube."

"You're going to expand?"

They were in Bobbi's car then, driving through downtown San Jose, Summer saying, "Shit, yeah. Saturday and Sunday charter flights. Leave Toronto six in the morning, I'm home by nine the same night. I get a few more to carry, that's huge. You can get the supply?"

"From Columbia, up through Panama," Bobbi said. "You're going to be rich."

"Richer than lap dancing, that's for sure."

Pulling up in front of the Hilton Bobbi said, "What about those Saints of Hell," and Summer said what they don't know won't hurt them.

"They might hurt you, though," Bobbi said. "They find out."

"How they gonna do that, when it's just us girls?"

Bobbi pulled around the corner, already on her cell, saying, "It's just the two of them so far, he's going to meet her at the airport, take them both out," thinking, yeah, this Summer never suspecting Bobbi was with the Saints. That's how they took over, though, that progressive, non-sexist thinking. Tied the market up tight.





GROW HOUSE

Steve Barrett had been back from Afghanistan two weeks when he stole his first car, a brand new BMW X5, leather interior, V8. What he did was, he stood around the parking lot of the Vaughn Mills Mall in north Toronto until some woman pulled in driving it and he followed her inside. Then he gave a couple of teenagers fifty bucks to steal her purse and while she was giving the mall security guard shit for half an hour, Steve drove the car to a garage on Dufferin owned by a biker named Danny Mac who gave him ten grand in cash.

It was the same kind of independent thinking the army sent him home for showing. What the fuck did they expect him to do in Canada?

Now, less than a month later, he was driving north on Avenue Road in a Jaguar XJ, British Racing Green, slowing down in front of the Four Seasons, looking for his girlfriend, Summer, and there she is, looking like every other twentysomething blonde on Yorkville; expensive skirt suit with the skirt way too short showing off fantastic skinny legs and a nice ass, the little jacket buttoned up to show her tits spilling out of the push-up bra, sunglasses and a big Holt Renfrew bag over her shoulder. And talking on the phone. She could be just another one of the rich kids with Daddy's credit card, but when she got in the car saying, "The fuck you talking about Freddie, don't give me that shit," there was enough edge, it was real.

That, and everything in the big Holt Renfrew bag was stolen.

Steve pulled away from the curb looking at her and she gave him the nanosecond smile and went back to talking to her brother, saying they'd be right there and Steve saying, no we won't, and Summer saying, don't fucking worry and Steve saying worry all you want, I'm not helping and Summer saying, "Are you sure they're dead?"

And Steve thinking, okay, this is something different, and reaching over and taking the phone away from Summer, flipping it closed.

"What the fuck? I was talking."

"On a cell Summer? Anybody can be listening."

She grabbed the phone back, flipped it open and started dialing, saying, "Oh yeah, like anybody gives a shit what I have to say. We're going north, he's in some burb, Aurora or some shit."

A half hour later they were pulling up in front of a house, maybe five years old, in a subdivision packed full of houses almost exactly the same. It was late afternoon, around four, and the place was deserted.

420 Maple. Steve said, "So what was he, robbing the place?" He parked two houses down and Summer said, what are you doing?

"I'm not parking right in front."

"We're not going to be long."

Steve said you got that right, and they got out and walked towards the house, Summer saying they had to use the side door. The house was brick, two story, probably 3500 square feet, garage in the front, four feet away from the ones on each side.

Freddie let them in and took them straight to the unfinished basement. At the bottom of the stairs, on the concrete, the two women were lying in a heap. Their heads were both flopped to the side on weird angles and there was a lot of blood. They looked to be early twenties, Vietnamese probably.

Freddie said, "I was supposed to just tie them up, but they wouldn't stop hitting me."

Summer turned and went back into the kitchen.

Steve walked down the stairs, looked at the two women and then back up at Freddie, standing there at the top of the stairs, looking like a hippie – long hair in a loose pony tail, tie-dyed tee, cut-off jeans and fucking sandals. Steve shook his head. "Okay, let's go." He walked back up the stairs.

Freddie followed into the kitchen saying, "I can't go."

Steve said, "Get in the car," and Freddie said, "No."

Summer said, "What the fuck," and Freddie said, "I have to get the plants."

The whole house, every inch of the place was covered in pot plants. Big ones. Freddie showed them around saying he was supposed to tie up the Vietnamese chicks and harvest the plants. In the living room, thick like a jungle, Freddie's girlfriend, Sasha, the female version of Freddie in a tie-dyed cotton dress, was already pulling up plants and shoving them into green garbage bags.

Summer said, "I can't believe this shit," and Steve said, why not? "It's Freddie."

Victor drove and Gord sat in the passenger seat of the van, Victor saying he hated the suburbs and Gord saying it could be good, get your own place, a little space. Victor said that was fine for Gord and Connie, they had kids, but a guy like him, single, condo all the way.

Gord opened the bag at his feet and looked at the guns; two Glocks and two Beretta 95Rs, full auto, you had to hold them with two hands but no bigger than the Glocks.

Victor said, "You think Freddie grew some balls?"

"This is just my travelling bag, what I always take."

"Could be a little loud out here."

"I don't expect we'll have to fire more than one shot."

Victor figured no, they probably wouldn't. He glanced at Gord and thought, well, no more than two anyway.

The living room was like a verdant jungle, thick with plants and heavy with humidity. The windows were covered with plywood, but built out like boxes with lights in them and curtains so from the outside it looked normal, like the curtains were closed all the time. There were lights on tracks that moved slowly across the room and the place stank of fertilizer.

Freddie and Sasha were pulling up the plants by the roots and dumping them in green garbage bags and Steve said, okay then, they don't want to come, "Let's go."

Summer said, "No." She said they were all going.

Steve heard a car door slam out front and looked at the front door of the house. He started walking to the door, saying, "Freddie, how come that wire's unhooked?"

Freddie never looked up from the bags, he just said, "They told me, unhook the traps, get to work."

He didn't get to say any more. Steve was already beside the door, on the hinge side waiting and when it opened and the arm extended in holding the Glock he slammed into with his shoulder and the gun fell to the floor.

A guy said, "What the fuck, Freddie?" and pulled his arm back and Steve picked up the gun and slammed the door.

The guy said, "Open the fucking door, Freddie," and Freddie started towards it, got there and started to open it when the guy raised another gun and Steve slammed the door again as the guy started firing.

Freddie said, "What the fuck," falling down from the door slamming and the sound of the gun,

the bullets hit the ceiling and a couple of the lamps exploded.

Steve flipped up the letter slot in the door with the Glock and fired two shots. The guy outside said, "Freddie, man, that you?" and Steve fired again, but the guy was gone back to the van.

Then the living room was really quiet. All four of them standing around and Steve said, "Okay Freddie, who wants to kill you?"

Freddie said he had work to do and went back to pulling up the plants.

Friday night, the kids at their Dad's apartment, Holly Kennedy thought she should be out having a good time but she was so tired. Got home from work a little after six, had a couple of glasses of the Shiraz while she took a bath and played the stereo really loud, listening to Cyndi Lauper and The Pretenders. She was going to put on the leather mini and black push-up bra, the silk blouse and her fuck-me boots with the four inch spike heels and meet Linda and Sue downtown but when she got out of the tub she just kept the robe on and poured some more wine.

Now it was dark and she was in the kitchen and there was a guy standing on the patio just outside her sliding doors.

She picked up the handset of the cordless and dialed 9-1 and the guy smiled and waved a little, an unlit cigarette in his hand and he motioned for a light. He looked to be in his forties, maybe a couple years older than Holly, and clean cut. Nice looking, if a little like a hoser in jeans and a vest, tall and skinny, short hair and no ball cap, that was good. He was still smiling a little so she made sure he saw the phone as she walked towards the sliding doors.

He said, "Have you got a light?"

She said, "What are you doing in my yard?"

"I'm looking for my dog."

"Un-huh, and when you find him," she said, "are you going to shoot him?"

He looked at the Glock on his belt and said, "No."

Then Holly said, "Are you here for the growhouse next door," and before he said anything, she said, "Are you a cop?"

The guy said he was trying to stay out of sight. Holly was right up beside the doors then, and the guy stepped up close. He said, "It's just surveillance tonight," looked at the dark house next door and said, "We hope."

Holly went to the drawer beside the fridge and came back with a lighter, sliding open the door and saying, "You got another one of those?"

The guy got a cigarette out of his pack and handed it to her. She lit it and handed him the lighter, not taking the smoke from her lips. She inhaled and then blew smoke at the sky, following it up with her eyes, looking at the stars.

The guy said, so, you knew it was a growhouse, and Holly said, yeah, anybody could tell, never

see anyone coming or going, lights going on and off at the same time every day, curtains never open. Then she looked at the guy and said, “Oh, wow, you want to know why I didn’t call it in? I have two kids. They’re at their Dad’s tonight, all weekend. We’re divorced.”

“It’s okay,” the guy said, “take it easy. I understand.”

She said, “I’m Holly,” and he said, “Gord.” They shook hands.

Steve said there was still at least one guy in the van, the other one went around back. “Who are they Freddie?” Steve was walking back and forth from the kitchen to the front door, looking at the backyard and the front yard. “Why do they want to kill you, Freddie?”

Freddie and Sasha were just about finished bagging the plants in the living room. They had a dozen or so big green garbage bags piled up by the door to the garage. Freddie said, “Okay, now we got upstairs. Four bedrooms.”

He walked up and Sasha followed him. Steve said, “Shit,” and Summer said she’d talk to him.

In the bedroom, same two tiers of plant beds set up, same vents, same big plastic tubs of nutrients and pumps, windows covered with the plywood boxes. Freddie was already working.

Summer said, “If you worked this hard at a real job you’d be doing good now.”

“If a real job paid like this.”

“Come on, Freddie, what the fuck are you doing?”

He kept pulling the plants up by their roots. “I know, I know.” He shook his head, looking pissed off and then mad at himself. “This isn’t right.”

“No, It’s not.”

“Should be cutting off the leaves, trimming everything. Playing some tunes, smoking some, having a brew. Harvest time on the farm.”

“Freddie.”

“Just leave the stalks.”

“What’s going on?”

“That’s one of the toughest things you know, the stalks. You can’t just put them in those big paper garden waste bags out by the curb - kind of noticeable.”

“So what do you do with them?”

“Dump ‘em. Sometimes we drive for hours, up to Wasaga or something. Sometimes we dump ‘em in Richmond Hill, everybody knows the Chinks are all growing.”

“Why are you doing it?”

“What do you mean, why? A thousand bucks a plant, two hundred plants in here, do the math, you’re always so smart. How could I not.”

Summer said, no, Freddie, “I mean, why are you stealing these?”

Freddie stopped grabbing plants for a minute and looked at his sister. His little sister but she was always like his big sister, since she was eight and he was ten and she got smarter, figured things out faster. Told them what their mother really did for a living with all those men.

“Because my crop failed, okay?” He dropped a full garbage bag and picked up an empty one. He looked away from Summer and tried to get the bag open, the plastic sticking to itself, saying, “It looks easy, they’re just fucking weeds, they grow everywhere, right? Well, it’s not so fucking easy.” He was pulling on the bag, couldn’t get the two sides apart. “Fucking pump stops working, hose comes loose, you get a flood, the lights burn out, the house gets too hot or too cold, you have to be on top of it fucking constantly. Shit, this stupid bag.”

Summer said, it’s almost like a real job, isn’t it, and Freddie said shut up.

She slapped him across the face and he pulled his arm back, made a fist.

She said, “Don’t you fucking dare. Who set you up?”

Freddie said he had no idea what she was talking about. Summer took the bag, licked her fingers and slide the plastic apart.

“Okay, Freddie,” Summer said. “You be the tough guy.” She walked out of the room and Freddie said, “Wait.”

She said you have to tell me the truth and he said okay.

Victor sat in the van and thought he could just drive away. Fuck it, get it done another night. But he needed this right now. It should have gone easy. Gord should have just walked in and shot fuck-up Freddie in the head. Then Victor would go in, say well done man, way to go, and shoot Gord. Too bad, Gord was a good guy but he was practically out of the business these days, his fucking front he set up working so well. Honest contractor. Shit.

Make it look like Freddie was robbing the place and Gord caught him. Put the gun in Freddie’s hand, make it look like he got off a lucky shot before he died. Could be in the back of Gord’s head, that would work, like he shot Freddie and turned around too soon. Must have been in a million movies, the guy you think is dead sits halfway up and gets another round off. Might be a hard sell, fuck-up Freddie actually hitting somebody with one shot, but it could work. Not like there’d be any of that *CSI* shit, couple of dead guys in a growhouse.

Victor thinking it should have worked. It would have gotten fucking Danny Mac off his back. Giving him all this shit, five grow ops hit in the last two months, all of them at harvest time. Danny Mac going fucking ballistic over who it could be – Danny Trahn, Colucci’s boys, some of the stragglers didn’t patch over – who’d have the balls to rip off their houses.

Only a matter of time before Danny Mac figured out it was Victor, tired of kicking up fifty percent of every house. Rob them himself, get full value from the harvest down the highway in Detroit no less, American money.

So, tell Danny he and Gord would find the motherfucker then send in Freddie. Pop him and Gord and be done with it.

But there was no way that was Freddie slamming the door and firing off the rounds with the Glock. That was a real shooter, guy didn't panic.

Victor decided to wait, see what Gord could find out around back. Might be able to still finish this tonight.

Steve closed the fridge door, the thing was empty, not even plugged in and Sasha came into the kitchen. She said, "I've got some green tea if you want, maybe half a sandwich."

She went through her backpack on the floor, getting out a plastic bottle and a baggie with some kind of stuffed pita bread. "It's vegetarian."

Steve took the tea and passed on the pita saying, "Of course it is."

Sasha stood up, stretched, raising her arms over her head and Steve looked at her breasts in the cotton dress. She had a thin tee shirt on under but no bra, and her nipples were standing right up. She said, "You know what Freddie told me? You know all this equipment? You know where they got it?"

"No," Steve said, "I don't." Sasha looked back into the living room, towards the stairs, all the equipment, but maybe listening for Freddie. Steve said, "A garden store?"

Sasha looked back at him, smiling now, flirting for sure. "Maybe the first time. For this house, they got it all at the police auction."

"No shit."

She wasn't really good at the flirting, but she was trying. "From some warehouse that got busted last winter. They bought enough to start up five more houses."

"That is pretty funny."

"Freddie says the cops don't care, it's like a make-work project. These guys start up a new house every week."

She was looking right at Steve, making a face at him, playful, and he grabbed her arm and pulled her close. She said, "Ow," and he said, "Who Sasha? Who are these guys?"

"Ow, I don't know."

"Who we dealing with here, Sasha?"

"Let me go, I don't know."

"What did Freddie tell you?"

"He doesn't tell me anything."

"What's going on, Sasha?"

"I don't know." She looked up at Steve's eyes, saw him staring back and she said, "Okay, okay,

it was like his boss.”

He loosened his grip, but still held her arm. He said, “What’s his name?”

“I’m not sure. Vincent? Vinnie?”

“Victor?”

“Maybe.”

He let go of her arm and she stayed standing close. Steve said, “Freddie’s crop went for shit so Victor told him to steal this one?”

“I’ve never seen Freddie like this. I guess he’s in deep to these guys, I don’t know how much. He had his house running for a while, got out some plants, delivered some, it looked good.”

“But it didn’t last.”

“No.”

“It never does.”

“So, I don’t know, Freddie was talking to them, they wanted their money, they didn’t care about his crop. He didn’t know what to do.”

“So then Victor set this up.”

“I guess so. All I know is Freddie was really happy. I mean, I’ve never seen him so happy, really. This was going to solve all our problems.”

“This one robbery?”

“We were going to take off, we’re going to BC, some friends of Freddie’s have a place. Freddie said we were going to buy some land.”

“You were going out to BC loaded after this one job?”

“We already picked out the Winnibego.”

Steve looked at her and thought, can she really believe that’ll work, and figured sure, she’s with Freddie, she’ll believe anything. “Okay.” Now he’d have to go and talk to Freddie.

“Wait.”

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

“Um, well, I don’t have to go to BC. I mean, I don’t really know anybody there.”

She was looking at him, pleading, and Steve said don’t worry. “You’ll make friends.”

Holly was laughing and thinking this guy Gord was okay, he was all right. She never would have met anybody like him at the Docks with Linda and Sue, they’d’ve taken one look at him and said no way. Course, there was no way this guy Gord would ever be in a downtown club, dancing, getting shitfaced with the kids.

He was saying, no, he never had any kids, his one marriage broke up after a couple of years and that was a long time ago.

They were sitting in the plastic Muskoka chairs on the patio. There was an ashtray on the arm of Holly's chair that was almost full, she kept lighting up out of nervousness. She hadn't been nervous around a guy in years. She'd opened another bottle of red wine and got the real glass glasses out of the cupboard.

She said, "Was it the police work?"

Gord said, "What?"

"Why your marriage broke up. Your wife thought it was too dangerous?"

Gord said, yeah, that was it. "And the hours, you know, lousy long hours."

"Yeah."

"Is that what happened with your husband?"

"Working too much? No." She laughed. "He never worked too many hours in his God damned life. He just couldn't keep his dick in his pants, likes them young."

She watched out of the corner of her eye, not looking right at him. She was happy to see he just nodded, taking it in, like these things happen.

Then he said, "Too bad. Guess he had no idea what he had was just going to keep getting better."

"And better," Holly said. "You need a refill?" And she held up the bottle.

Steve got to the top of the stairs and Freddie was standing in the hall talking on his cell. He held it to Steve and said, "It's for you."

Steve took the phone and kept staring at Freddie. He said, "Yeah?"

Victor said, "That your Jag?"

"Yeah."

"So why don't you just get in it and drive away."

"What's it worth to you?"

Victor said, shit man, "This has nothing to do with you. Just get in your car and drive away."

Steve kept looking at Freddie and said, "So that's the plan, you just let me walk out of the house and drive away, then you come in here and kill Freddie, make it look like you caught him ripping you off."

Freddie shook his head like that was such bullshit and Steve held the phone out so he could hear Victor say, "Works for me."

Freddie said, "The fuck you talking about, Vic."

Steve put the phone back to his own ear and said, "Yeah, okay, it works for me, too. I don't give a shit about Freddie."

Summer had come out of the bathroom and heard most of the conversation and she was saying we can't do that, and come on, and shit but Steve wasn't listening. He was saying into the phone, "I'm bringing one chick with me," and Victor said, fine, bring all the chicks you want.

"I just need Freddie."

Steve flipped the phone shut.

Sasha had come up the stairs and Steve looked from her to Summer and said, "Who's it gonna be?"

Summer said, "Fuck you, no one's going."

Steve turned and walked down the stairs, saying, "I am."

Summer said, "Some hero you are," and Steve stopped on the stairs and said, "Why'd you think I was some kind of hero?"

"I just thought," Summer said, "you'd never let some asshole tell you what to do."

Steve said, "Nice try, Summer," and started down the stairs again.

And then Freddie said, "Wait. I've got an idea."

Victor hung up his cell and thought maybe Gord had the right idea, maybe they should just wait and do this another night, but fuck, how much longer would Danny Mac wait before he just popped Vic? No, Freddie's in there, somebody else with him, it'll just look even better. Take them all out.

Victor took the Barreta and got out of the van. It was after midnight now, the whole sub division was dead. Dark and quiet. Okay, just go in shooting.

Then he saw the Jag and he had a better idea. He called Freddie and told him to put his friend on and said to whoever the guy was, he had a new idea. "I'm going to fire a couple dozen rounds into your brand new Jag."

The guy said, "No, okay, don't do that man, not my car."

Victor was standing in the middle of the lawn then, looking at the house, the cell in one hand, the machine pistol in the other. He said, "Okay then. Just walk out and get in the car and drive away."

Steve flipped Freddie's phone shut and said the guy's plan was just fine.

Summer said, "I don't know," and Freddie said, yeah man, "I don't think we should open the door."

"No," Steve said, "it's good. Look, he's standing right there." He flipped open the lock, looked at the extension cord unhooked, and then he looked at Freddie. "Hey, this is mostly your plan. You ready?"

Freddie had one of the sixty litre white plastic tubs on its side by the door. He said, "As I'll ever be," and Steve opened the door.

They saw Victor standing there waiting.

Freddie and Steve picked up the tub and rolled it out the door and down the lawn towards Victor.

He said, "What the fuck," and did exactly what they knew he would.

He shot it.

And it blew up like the bomb it was, flame shoot up a hundred feet and the thing turned into a fireball rolling towards the van.

Steve, Summer, Freddie and Sasha ran towards the Jag. Steve fired off a couple of rounds from the Glock at the same time he pushed the little button on the keyring and the car doors unlocked.

Victor got it together enough to fire a couple rounds but nothing hit the Jag as it took off down the street.

Gord was up and off the lawn chair and looking around the corner of the house as Victor came into the back yard saying, "Come on, the front door's wide open."

"Yeah," Gord said, "and every cop in the city's on his way."

Victor said, "Come on, we can still do this," and waved the Beretta.

Gord said, "We've got to get out of here."

"Get in the God damned house, you're as good as Freddie."

"You're just going to kill me? Was that your fucking plan all along?"

"Yeah, you and Freddie both die in a fucking gun battle. I'm not saying it was a good plan, Gord, but it would have worked. This'll work, too. The bad guys killed you, but they'll never be back. Solves all my problems."

"You'd kill me, just like that? What about Connie, what about my kids?"

"Fuck your wife, this is real."

Victor fired a short burst from the Beretta and hit Gord in the stomach. He crumpled to the patio.

There were sirens then, seemed like from every direction in the sub division, and Victor turned

around, took a step towards the street and said, “Shit.”

There was a loud bang and the bullet hit Victor in the back. He said, “Shit,” again and he couldn’t believe his plan would have worked, the guy who’s been shot gets off one last round, just like in the movies. He started to turn around to say something to Gord and he got hit again.

Holly stood there with Gord’s gun in her hand and watched Victor fall.

Gord, blood coming out of his mouth, blood from his guts all over the patio, looked up at her and said, “Yeah, that’s good. Get me inside before the fucking cops get here.” He started to lift himself up but he collapsed.

She said, “You’re married?”

Gord said, “What, so? Come on.”

Holly sat down on the patio chair and put the gun on the little plastic table. She picked up Gord’s cigarettes and lit one with her own lighter. She blew smoke at the stars and said, “You said you weren’t married. Bastard.”

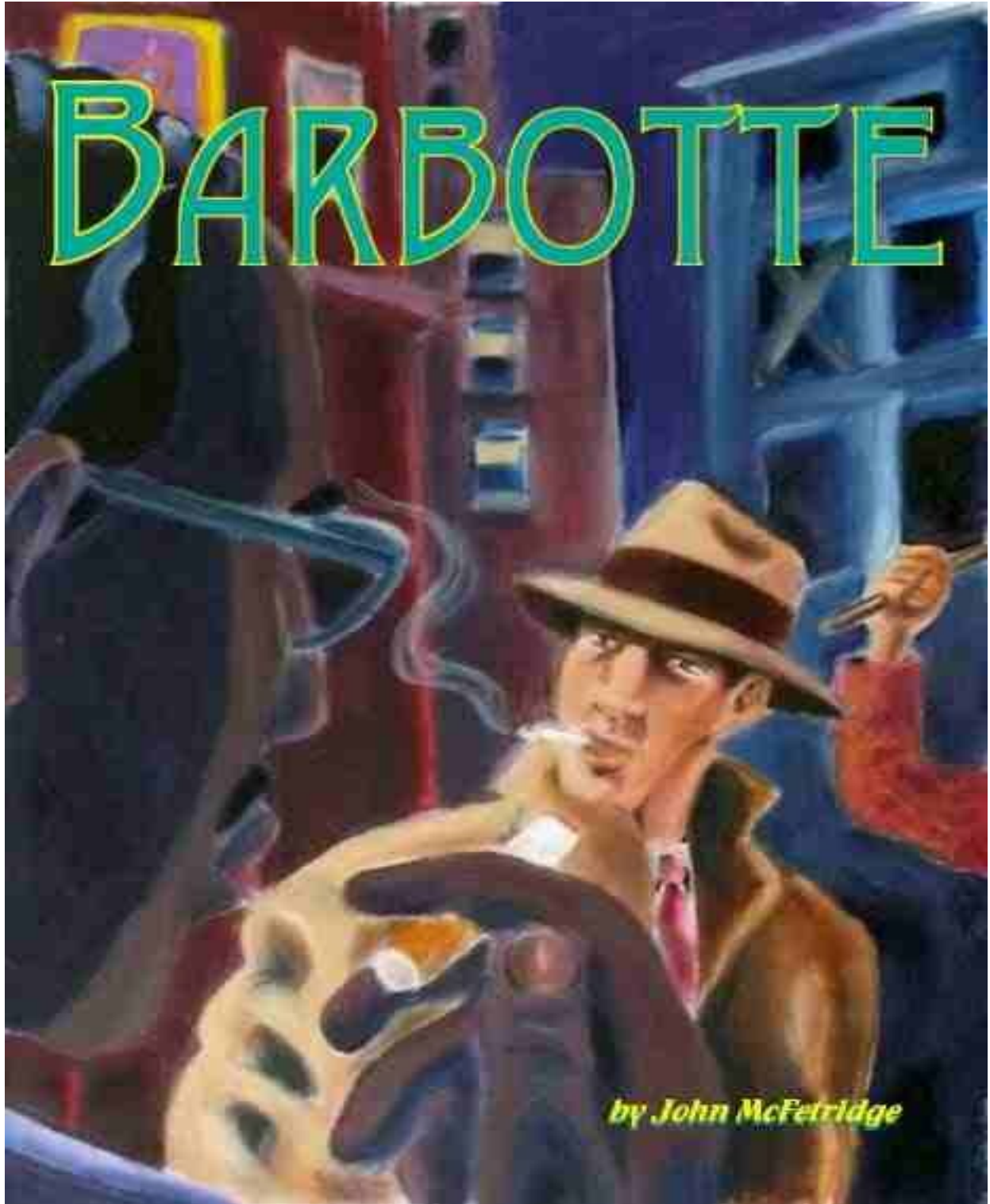
When she heard the cop cars and fire trucks pulling up in front, Holly stood up and put Gord’s gun in his own dead hand. She stubbed out the smoke and stood by the patio door. She figured she could make how pissed off she was look like she was scared and freaked out.

Say something like, “I couldn’t believe it officer, these guys just shot each other in my own backyard.” Tell them one guy said he was a cop and she knew they’d say he wasn’t. They’d say he was a bad guy.

She’d say, yeah, she figured that out.



BARBOTTE



by John McFetridge

Barbotte

Nat Lawson had his head down running the phone cable when Sid Aidelbaum said they were taking a lot of Rockhead's action on Robinson.

Harvey Gerber, walking through the backroom said, "So, spade money's still money." He looked at Nat and then back to Sid. "Right?"

"Right."

Gerber walked around like he owned the place, the Bellevue Theatre on Bleury, but he didn't. Sid did since his father died. He really had no intention of taking it over but when his father got TB and went into the sanitarium he had no choice. Gerber owned the book and the Barbotte room in the back which brought in ten times as much as the Marx Brothers and Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman flicking across the screen out front ever would. He said to Sid, "That line better run silent."

Sid looked over at Nat who stood up slow to his full six feet, half a foot taller than anybody else in the room, and said, "Sure, Mr. Gerber. Nat here's the best guy the phone company's got. No taps on this line, no traces, no records ever."

Gerber grunted something and walked out.

Nat said, "Nice guy."

Sid opened the green wax paper and asked Nat if he wanted a sandwich.

"What is it?"

"Wilenski special." Sid took a bite. "Pastrami." Nat said, no, that's okay, he'd get a smoked meat at Schwartz's later.

Sid said, "It's making me nervous, all this action. But we have to do something, we didn't get anything on the Cup. Who'd take the Bruins?"

Nat said, "You gotta give better odds, Sid," and Sid said, "if it was up to me."

Nat looked at him and Sid tilted his head to the next room where Gerber was watching the Barbotte dice clatter. Nat said, oh, and went to back to the cable. Then he said, "What kind of odds is he giving on Robinson?"

“First time a coloured guy steps up to the plate in white baseball? Three to one he doesn’t get on base.”

“What about the next time?”

“The whole game.”

“No wonder you’re getting so much action.”

Sid stopped with the pastrami halfway to his mouth and said, why? “What do you know?”

“A lot of those guys at Rockhead’s, they were in the service, saw Robinson when he was at Fort Hood.” The coloured guys, Americans, up to Montreal to hear the jazz at Rockhead’s Paradise.

Sid said, so. “Way I hear it he wasn’t even the best one in the Negro League.”

“He wasn’t even the best on the Monarchs,” Nat said. “Doesn’t mean he won’t tear the hide off it against Jersey City.”

Sid put the sandwich down and said, “Oy vey.” He was sick about it, all the bets they’d taken. But hell, Gerber set the odds.

Jackie Robinson’s first game in all white baseball, April 18, 1946, playing for the Montreal Royals, the Dodgers top farm team against the Jersey City Giants. He went three for four; single, double, homer, drove in four runs.

Gerber looked in the toolbox and said, “That’s a lot of money.”

“Twenty-one thousand dollars.”

“You better get some extra flatfoots out tonight.” Gerber looked at Inspecteur Desrosieres of the Montreal Police, coming out of the back room down fifty seven bucks at the Barbotte table. “There’s gonna be a lot of drunken niggers.”

Desrosieres said, “As long as they stay below St. Antoine.”

Nat closed his toolbox.

Gerber said, “You sure about this?” and Sid said, yeah, it was the best way.

Desrosieres looked at Nat and said, “A man like you, so trustworthy, have you ever thought of joining the police?”

Nat said, no, “I’m trying to stay on the right side of the law.”

A nervous laugh from Sid and Desrosieres said, “Quite,” his phony accent more British than the old ladies of the Golden Mile.

“Everybody knows we took this action,” Sid said. “The Italians will be looking for this cash, the frogs too.”

“And Rockhead’s boys know it’s coming. I don’t like keeping it all in one place.”

Sid said, “It’s got to be done,” and Nat picked up his tools and walked out to his dark green phone company truck parked in the lane beside Gerber’s brand new Fleetwood Cadillac, dark blue with whitewalls, one of the first ones off the assembly line when they stopped putting the V8 in tanks.

Up on Ste. Catherine Street the big nightclubs, the El Morocco, the Latin Quarter, the Samovar, the Copacabana, they all advertised their acts as 'Direct from New York,' and a few of them might really have been, but down the hill at the bottom of Mountain Street and on St. Antoine, past Central Station and in the shadows of the grain elevators and the Redpath Flour Mill, at Rockhead's Paradise and Café St. Michel, the stars were 'Direct from Harlem.' Those clubs hopped. People coming in from Toronto and Albany thought it was wild up on Ste. Catherine but the folks from Chicago and New York thought it was wild down below.

Nat Lawson parked his phone company truck beside the garage on St. James and took his tool box. Before the war, when he was a kid, Nat used to ride with his father, making deliveries for Dow Breweries. His father went back with Rufus Rockhead from when Rufus worked for the railroad, the Montreal to Chicago run and prohibition was good to them. Lawson's father could get all the booze Rockhead could move. And it was a lot. Rockhead saved his money and opened his club, then he bought the hotel next door to serve the coloured guys working the trains and musicians playing his club. Lately, though, it was getting an awful lot of servicemen on leave from Camp Pine in upstate New York. A three day leave, the white guys headed for New York City and the coloured men to Montreal where they could be men.

Sam Lawson had a heart attack behind the wheel of his truck while Nat was in a hospital in Glasgow recovering from the pneumonia he got after spending two nights in the north Atlantic when the Corvette he was on got torpedoed by a U Boat.

Now Nat was walking down St. Antoine carrying his toolbox. He heard something in the lane, thought it was a couple of the guys from the band smoking a reefer, but then he heard something banging a trash can and then a sob. Looked into the shadows and saw a waitress sitting on a trash can crying. As he got closer he saw she was white with dark hair. When he was all the way in the lane she looked over her shoulder at him and said, "I didn't want to do it, Nat, I didn't."

He thought it was Evelyn from Café St. Michel, not really white but she could pass, and then the pipe hit him and he staggered, his eyes watering up. Another belt and he went down, rolled under a car and saw feet running away, a car door slamming, engine going, tires honest-to-God squealing. He jumped up but the blood was running down his face, drained right out of his head and he fell hard.

"I knew that mick would flop on you."

"They could have killed him," Sid said and Gerber said, yeah, so what?

He was standing in the doorway, his overcoat on, the cigar in his mouth.

Sid's sister Leah was standing beside the desk shaking her head and saying, "Everybody knew we were making the delivery."

"That's why the mick did it instead of you," Gerber said. "They weren't supposed to know about him."

Sid was still sitting behind his desk. He looked from his little sister to Gerber. This had all

happened while he was away in the navy. Before he left, before the war, he'd taken over the theatre when his father got TB and went into the sanitarium. It wasn't what he wanted to do at all but he had to take care of the family. Then, when the ships he was on were getting torpedoed out from under him by U Boats, Leah took over the theatre, needed money, and let Gerber in through a crack in the door.

Sid knew what he wanted now.

He said, "It could have been anybody."

Gerber nodded, even looked sympathetic. "Anybody? By me this is the niggers, either Rockhead himself, or Booker T at St. Michel."

"So, we can get it back?"

"We?"

Sid looked at him.

Gerber shrugged. "You still need to pay them."

Leah said, "Pay them? Where are we going to get that kind of money? That was everything we had." She looked at Sid but he didn't say anything.

Gerber just stood there, his look saying, not my problem. He waited, let the silence hang there and then said, "You've got something."

Sid said, "Harv, come on."

Leah said, "No, we won't."

Gerber said, if you can find another way, and walked out.

As soon as he was gone Leah started pacing in the small office. She said, there's got to be a way.

Sid said, "Leah, we've done all we can."

She stopped and stared at him. Then she got her cigarettes, Sweet Caporals, out of her purse and struck a match on the blotter on top of the desk. She inhaled and blew smoke at the ceiling, saying, "I can't see it being Rufus Rockhead. Who's this Booker T?"

Sid had leaned back in his chair, now more interested in this new little sister of his. He said, "What are you going to do," and she said, "I'm not going to do nothing."

Sid shook his head. "Look, I know you didn't have any choice during the war," and she cut him off, saying, you have no idea.

"We all had troubles. But we didn't give up, none of us. We did what we had to do." She looked at him and he waited. "We're not going to give up now. I let Gerber in here, but I won't give him the theatre. I won't."

"Maybe it's for the best."

"Could Nat Lawson have stolen it?"

"Given himself a concussion and fifteen stitches?"

"Maybe he was in on it, didn't expect to get hit that hard."

Sid said, "Leah, you've been sitting out there watching too many movies." He stood up and took his coat from the rack. "The only reason I'm alive is because of Nat. There's no way."

He touched his sister's shoulder on the way out.

Leah Aidelbaum rode the number 58 streetcar down Peel, south past the big brewery and then west along Wellington. Through the tunnel and she was in Point St. Charles, right away thinking how much the Irish slum looked just like the St. Urbain slum where she was born. Four story houses built right up to the street, no yards, no grass anywhere, noisy. These walk-ups didn't have the wrought iron railings out front but they had the same wooden sheds in the back lane. She saw women hanging out washing and kids playing kick the can in the muddy street.

And then, she could hardly believe it, the sign actually said Bucket of Blood Tavern. Sid told her it was because most of the men who drank beer in there worked at the slaughterhouses south of Wellington, towards Goose Village, but she'd also heard it was because of the terrible fights there on Saturday nights. Or any nights.

Further on she saw the Bridge Tavern on the corner, at the turn for the Victoria Bridge. She'd been across that bridge once, on the train to New York City with Sid and her parents, going to visit her father's brother in Brooklyn. Before the war, when it was looking for a minute there like they'd finally started to climb their way up out of the depression. When they'd dared to hope.

Now she wasn't sure what she was going to do. This was where her plan ran out. It had taken so much just to get on the streetcar and ride down the hill to the Point.

Standing on the corner, looking at the taverns, smelling the coal yards and slaughterhouses and the boiling cabbage, she didn't know what to do. There were even a few more taverns, barely bigger than her kitchen, but they didn't allow women.

The neighbourhood was filled at that time of day, the late afternoon, mostly women and kids. She thought maybe she could ask around, see if anyone knew him, figuring he must be known around here and then she saw him.

She ran across Wellington, sidestepping a horse pulling a wagon full of rags, and stepped in a huge puddle before getting off the street and standing in his path.

She said, "Nathaniel Lawson, I'm Leah Aidelbaum," and she held out her hand.

He looked at her for a moment, then shook. "Have we met?"

She said, "I'm Sid's little sister. The bandages gave you away. Looks like you got them from Buster Keaton."

Nat touched the white cloth wrapped around his head like a hat and said, "Feels like it."

"Is there somewhere we could go to talk?"

Nat took her into the Bridge Tavern.

She ordered a Long Island Iced Tea and Nat said it was more of a beer and a shot kind of place. She tilted her head at him, her big brown eyes looking right at him from under her hat, looking years older

than her smooth white skin and bright red lips.

Nat didn't think she looked anything like Sid Aidelbaum.

She looked a lot more like someone who could get him into a lot of trouble.

He said, "A couple of 5 Crowns," and the bartender put two shot glasses in front of them and filled them both with Seagrams whiskey.

She said, "What about the beer?"

The bartender had already gotten two bottles of Dow and popped the caps off.

Leah said, "Oh."

"So, what brings you all the way down here?"

"We were wondering how you were."

Nat thought about that but didn't say anything.

"We're going to lose the Bellevue."

Nat drank his whiskey, downing it all in one slow swallow, savouring the taste going down. He put the empty glass on the bar and looked right at her.

"I'm sorry about what happened, but I didn't just hand it over."

"I know that. I'm not here to impugn your character."

Nat kept staring at her and she said, "It means cast doubt on your character."

"I know what it means."

"Oh. Well. My grandfather started that theatre. My father built it into one of the best in the city." Then she said, quietly, "I don't want to lose it."

Nat turned on the barstool and looked at her. At Leah Aidelbaum, came all the way down the hill to his neighbourhood. She stared right back at him, her dark eyes sparkling with fight.

Nat said, "If you didn't want to lose it, you never should have partnered up with Gerber," and right away she started in with, "I didn't have a choice, and the depression hit us all hard, and my father didn't plan on getting sick and dying and Sid didn't have to sign up. Nat held up his hand and she stopped.

Then she said, "The war's over, everyone's getting back on their feet. We're so close."

"The way the ball bounces."

She said, "Yeah." She had a lot more to say, Nat knew it, a bunch of questions about what really happened in that lane and did he see anything and who could it have been but she just shook her head. Then she said, "My brother won't talk about the war."

"What's to say?"

"He didn't need to sign up, you know. That day he did, you could hear my bubbi wailing from St. Urbain to Caughnawaga."

Nat almost smiled, hearing her mention the Indian reservation across the river from Montreal. "He did what he had to."

"Why did you sign up? You were already in a year before the war even started."

“Not like you couldn’t see it coming.”

“Not everybody did.”

“Not everybody wanted to.”

She said, yeah, that was true. Drank some of her beer and stared at the glass.

Nat couldn’t help it, he said, “What are you going to do?”

She turned the glass, shrugged. “Gerber’s going to front us the cash to pay Rockhead, take over the theatre. He’s been looking to go legit.”

“I thought he wanted to be Harry Feldman.”

Leah took her cigarettes out of her purse and offered one to Nat. He shook his head, no, and she said, “Am I supposed to be shocked you know the names of all the book makers in town, or are you testing me?”

“Little of both, I guess.”

Nat struck a match and held it up while Leah lit her cigarette.

She blew out smoke and said, “You know I didn’t do such a terrible job running the place. I just never had any capital. Now there’s so much new building going on, I’d like to see what I could really do.”

“Aren’t you supposed to give up your job like every other Rosie the Riveter, marry some hero and move out to Cote St. Luc.”

Leah said, yeah, and drank some more beer.

Then she said, “Who’s Booker T?”

“You’re never going to give this up, are you?”

“You know him, don’t you? Sid says you know everyone, you know this whole city. He says you can go anywhere, talk to people.”

“So?”

“So, could you?”

“Could I what?”

“Ask around. Find out who really took our money.”

Nat shook his head and said, “Do I look like Humphrey Bogart to you?” and Leah said, yeah, a little.

“You got those eyebrows, you know, and you frown when you look serious.”

He kept frowning. Said, “I don’t think it was Booker.”

“Would it hurt to ask?”

“It could.”

She looked at him, serious, and he looked back.

Yeah, she could get him in a whole bunch of trouble.

The big coloured guy at the door put his hand on the guy's chest and said, "Where do you think you're going?" The guy looked up at him and the doorman said, "Oh, hey Nat, didn't recognize you with the fedora."

"Payday, I'm looking for a night out." He could see inside the club where Louis Metcalfe's International Band was on stage and the place was already crowded and smoke filled.

"You want, you can sit at the bar."

Nat said thanks, started to walk in and then stopped and said, "You seen Evelyn?"

The doorman smiled, a tooth missing right in front, and said, "You really looking for a night out." He glanced around the club and said, "I ain't seen her all night. You want to talk to Abby?"

Nat said that was okay and walked along the back wall, then cut through the crowd to the bar. More than half the people in the place were coloured, and all seven guys on stage, but there were a few other white faces, guys who'd been in the service, seen the world and could tell the difference between real music and that swing crap they played up the hill.

Le Café St. Michel was famous because of Louis Metcalfe. He'd played with Ellington and his band was about the best in Canada. They'd play all night and after closing they'd hang around and guys from the big American bands in town would come down the hill to jam. The place would still be hopping when the sun came up.

Nat asked the bartender and a couple of waitresses if they'd seen Evelyn and then as he expected the doorman came over and smiled his gap toothed smile and asked him to step into the office.

Booker T was behind his desk waiting. Nat came in, the doorman stepped out and it was quiet. Booker T said, "Nathaniel boy, why you snooping around my club?"

Nat said, "I'm fine, Booker, just a bump on the head, good of you to ask. Lost some blood, but I won't be any slower than I ever was."

"Which was pretty damned slow."

Nat stared at him and Booker stood up. Even standing he wasn't much taller than Nat was sitting down.

He said, "Way I hear it, you was delivering that cash, wasn't even yours."

"Doesn't mean someone can try and kill me and take it."

"Those jewboys lose all their cash, what's it to me?"

"Where's Evelyn?"

"She quit."

"Just like that?"

"Homesick, she's gone back to Atlanta."

Nat stared at him, the both of them knowing that was bullshit.

"I'm sorry," Nat said. "I know you didn't have anything to do with it."

"Damn right, so stop snooping around my club."

"Somebody in here must have bet on Robinson."

“Oh, they get their money,” Booker said. “Gerber going to cover the book.”

“He tell you that?”

“Word is out.”

Word really was out. Nat asked around, going to the places that Leah said he could. Most of them were places he'd been to with his father, then places where he'd run silent phone lines. A couple of the brothels on De Bullion, the higher class bordellos up on Milton and a few other Barbotte rooms.

Really, he just drifted around town, which was what he'd been doing since getting out of the navy. What else was there to do? Like he said to Leah, get married and move out to Lachine, a twenty-five year mortgage on one of those little red brick houses they were throwing up? After five years in the north Atlantic, every day life and death, it just left him numb.

He felt like that guy with one arm in that movie with Myrna Loy, all those guys getting back to where they left off except it wasn't the same. Or it was the same but they weren't. He knew he wasn't.

In Manny's place, the gambling room set up behind the garage on Rue de la Commune in Griffintown Nat watched the boys play Barbotte. They rolled the dice and picked them up so fast, dropped their money and rolled again he could hardly follow. He'd already asked around, everybody knew about Aidelbaum losing big on Robinson and then not paying up, but that's all they knew. They rolled, counted and rolled again. The house won. They rolled. The house won again.

Nat couldn't see the point. Okay, so most of these guys were dead broke before the war and now they had a little money in their pockets, no reason to throw it away.

But then he saw the looks on their faces when they won, trying to control themselves, not to get too excited. But they needed the adrenaline, they needed something other than going to work and going home.

He wondered what he needed.

Walking out of the garage he saw a brand new Cadillac parked in front. It was red, a convertible, but it had the same whitewalls he'd seen before.

They were in the back room, Sid and Gerber. Gerber telling him how they were going to work it.

Sid said, “I'm going to throw up.”

Gerber chewed on his fat cigar and said, “Be a man. Do the paperwork, get your cousin Alvie to do it, get something out of that expensive McGill law school education.”

Sid nodded. He was beaten.

Nat said, “You were set up, Sid.”

Gerber took the cigar out of his mouth and said, “How the hell did you get in here?”

Sid barely looked up, said, “What?”

Nat stood by the door, toolbox in his hand. "You were supposed to lose. Gerber set those cockamamie odds on Robinson knowing you'd get all that action from Rockhead's boys." He never took his eyes off Gerber. "He never had any intention of paying off. He's got the money and now he's getting the theatre."

"That's a funny story, mick. Too bad this rat hole isn't Vaudeville anymore."

Sid said, "I told you the odds were too good."

"Shut up, you little pisher."

Leah Aidelbaum said, "No, you shut up."

She walked up behind Nat, the keys to the front door still in her hand.

"We want our money back."

"You got a lot of nerve, girlie. It don't look good on you."

Sid started for the door but the toolbox hit the ground with a crash.

Nat said, "It's still in your trunk, isn't it?" He was holding a gun.

Gerber said, "You don't want to do that."

"Doesn't mean I won't." Nat motioned with the gun and Gerber walked out the back door to the lane where his Cadillac was parked. Nat said, "You can open it or I'll shoot a hole in the lock."

"You kids are crazy. If it's not me it'll be someone else." He walked to the car and opened the trunk. The bag with the money was the only thing in it. "You think you can run a business like this without connections?"

Leah picked up the money. "We can try."

Gerber shook his head, told them they wouldn't last a week, but he got in his car and drove away.

Sid said he was going back inside and then Leah and Nat were alone in the dark lane.

She said, "I knew you'd find it."

He said, "Yeah. Now, I'm a private eye," and she said, why not?

They walked back into the theatre and he thought, yeah, why not.



This interview was conducted by Linda L. Richards and appeared on the January Magazine website in 2008.

A Snapshot of John McFetridge

Born: Greenfield Park, Quebec

Resides: Toronto

Birthday: November, 16 1959

Please tell us about *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*.

The blurb is: an urban grow operator under house arrest must decide whether to trust a too-sexy stranger when a murder investigation threatens her business.

Which I guess sums it up, but it does start with an, “Arab-looking” guy falling 20 floors off the top of the apartment building she runs her grow op in, her 21-year-old daughter is in the mix, bikers are moving into town and going to war with the mob and the cops are in the middle of a huge corruption investigation, so there are some other complications.

What’s on your nightstand?

The Big O by Declan Burke, *What Burns Within* by Sandra Ruttan and the non-fiction *McMafia: a Journey Through the Global Criminal Underworld* by Misha Glenny.

What inspires you?

Character, it’s all about the people. I spent a long time avoiding writing about people I knew, about their stories and situations, but the older I got the more I wondered, why? No one else seemed to be telling their stories, certainly not very many trying to do it in their voices (which is also my voice). So, I’m inspired by the people I’ve met, my friends.

What are you working on now?

More of the same, I guess. Another book with many of the same characters -- new main characters, though, that’s the series style I’m aiming for. Many of the same cops and the same crime figures involved in the lives of new people. I like the continuity of it, the way life goes on and the people keep doing what they’re doing, but I like new faces. In this book, *Swap*, an ex-US Army guy and an ex-Canadian Army guy who met in Afghanistan are back home and bringing drugs and guns with them. The Canadian guy is JT, a biker we meet in *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*.

Tell us about your process.

It’s changing. When I started writing novels my kids were very small. Jimmy was just over a year and Doug was two and a half. I was (and still am) a stay at home Dad. So, the boys and I would often go to the park in the morning and while pushing them on the swings or watching them in the sandbox, I’d work out stuff in my head and maybe make notes if I could find 30 seconds with a pen and piece of paper. Then, in the afternoon while they napped, I’d type up what I had on an old laptop at the kitchen table.

As the boys have gotten older, I've gotten more time. Now Doug is in grade four and Jimmy's in grade two so I drop them off at school in the morning and work till lunch. Then, I am the mack daddy of grilled cheese and pizza pops. In the afternoon I do research, poke around on line, get lost on blogs and webzines like this one and stuff till 3:30 and it's time to pick up my boys at school. I'm looking forward to when they're in high school and no longer come home for lunch (well, looking forward and not, at the same time).

As for the writing, I don't work out plots or outline or plan too far ahead. My books aren't mysteries with a crime being solved, they're about ongoing crimes. I work from character and theme. Very basic themes. *Dirty Sweet* is about opportunity – how is it that some people see opportunity everywhere and some people never see it? *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* is all about how did I end up here? I get characters I'm interested in and then I put them in situations I think are interesting and I see what they do. Then I see what they do next and around about page 250 I start to wonder, wow, how are they going to get out of this (or not get out of it)?

Francis Ford Coppola said that the idea is the question and making the movie is how you try and find the answer. Then he added, "Just try telling that to the money guy." It's a funny line when you're talking about movie money, but I find it actually works with books. The idea is the question and writing the book is finding out some of the answers. I don't know what the answers will be ahead of time, I have to write the book to find out.

Lift your head and look around. What do you see?

One one side is my kitchen and living room, my dog is sleeping on the couch (hey, get off the couch!) and on the other side is the window to my front yard and the street. I really like to feel plugged into my neighbourhood, to my city. I don't work well in solitude (well, I say that having lived in cities my whole life so I don't really know, but I strongly suspect...). I'm a couple blocks from the library and the grocery store and the park so I walk everywhere. It's a nice neighbourhood, very homey and like a small town in the middle of a big city. I know many of my neighbours and I like running into people when I'm out.

When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

When I read Elmore Leonard's *Swag*? I don't know. I wasn't much of a reader when I was a kid, but I loved the movies. I moved around a lot in high school (I went to four of them) and at the last one I met a guy I'm still friends with named Randy McIlwaine (he's now a cartoonist, very funny stuff). We went to lots of movies and decided to try and write one. We called it *Opening Night at the Bijoux* (we were in Montreal, see, and bijoux means jewelry in French, and we thought we were so clever, we imagined it as the sign outside an adult movie theatre, the Bijou X) and we still feel we pretty much invented the high school sex comedy. It pre-dated *Animal House* and *Meatballs* and *Porkys*.

Anyway, we showed it to some producers in Montreal and a couple were interested and it was fun (and extremely frustrating), but it never went anywhere. Anyway, I thought I could make movies. For twenty years I tried -- not always full-time, head on trying, but on and off.

After a while I realized all the movies I really liked were either made by John Sayles or based on a book. I was intimidated by the idea of trying to write a novel -- every novelist I ever heard talk was well-educated, well traveled, confident. Then another buddy of mine from my high school years, Michel Basilières, convinced me most novelists were just faking it, so I gave it a try. Michel is also a writer, his novel *Black Bird* won the Amazon.ca/Books in Canada Best First Novel Award a few years

ago.

If you couldn't write books, what would you be doing?

I don't know. Not much. Maybe I'd be a dog walker. I drifted aimlessly through a lot of my life. Dropped out of high school, moved out west, worked on construction sites and in warehouses, went back east, enrolled in university as a "mature" student and changed majors a few times before landing in English lit and history, dropped out and got kicked out a couple times before graduating at age 31. I thought I might be a teacher but after a dozen teacher's colleges turned me down I got the hint. I didn't have good enough marks to get into a master's program. And like I said, my 20 year attempt at filmmaking was a complete bust.

My brother just retired after 39 years as an RCMP officer and sometimes I think I should have done that.

To date, what moment in your career has made you happiest?

It's all been pretty good. I co-wrote a book of short stories, *Below the Line*, with my friend Scott Albert and getting that published was great. Then, when Jack David at ECW accepted *Dirty Sweet* and asked me if I could write some more books, that was pretty good. Working with Jack and Michael Holmes and everybody at ECW has been terrific. Being able to dedicate books to my wife after all she's put up with is pretty sweet, too, and makes me very happy. I was very surprised when *Dirty Sweet* and *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* got picked up by Harcourt in the US, and pretty happy about it.

For you, what is the easiest thing about being writer?

Because I write crime fiction maybe the easiest is that the world keeps giving me material. Every time I open the paper some criminal has done some wacky, dumb thing and I just try and imagine what could have possibly led up to that and I have a scene.

Writing crime fiction is also a good way to deal with the huge amounts of hypocrisy I see every day. I write a scene in which a bunch of bikers talk about how they'd be out of business if marijuana was legalized and I feel like I've done some social commentary and maybe been a little entertaining at the same time.

What's the most difficult?

Working alone all the time. One of the things that kept me trying to make movies all those years was the social aspect of it, the hanging out on set with a bunch of funny people doing something they liked (I always felt almost all that on set bitching was fake). I know writers are supposed to love the solitude, the quiet contemplation and all that, but it drives me crazy.

What question do you get asked about your writing most often?

Oh, the usual, where do the ideas come from. That way I know the person asking isn't from Toronto or they'd recognize almost every crime in my books from stories in the newspaper.

What's the question you'd like to be asked?

Not this one, that's for sure ;) I don't know, I'm pretty open about trying to answer whatever people ask.

What question would like never to be asked again?

I was confronted after a reading once by a very angry guy demanding to know why I would put young black men committing crimes in my book. I don't actually mind the question, I think it's good to start

the dialogue and I think we avoid difficult questions too much in Canada, but he was a pretty scary guy and he kept shoving me and saying it was, “at your peril” (he had an odd accent and the phrase seemed to fit him). We talked for a while. I don’t think he ever agreed with me that we need to get this stuff -- racism, crime, sexism, inequality -- out in the open, we need to talk about it even if it makes us uncomfortable (or because it makes us uncomfortable) if we’re going to see the end of it, but at least we didn’t come to blows.

Tell us something about yourself that no one knows.

For most of my life I wanted to play goalie for the Montreal Canadiens When I was a kid I was such a bad hockey player I was too embarrassed to tell my friends. Now I want to play soccer for Toronto FC.



This interview was conducted by Declan Burke and appeared on the Crime Always Pays Website, December 2007.

What crime novel would you most like to have written?

Swag – or really anything by Elmore Leonard.

Who do you read for guilty pleasures?

I read all over the place and I don't feel guilty about any of it.

Most satisfying writing moment?

When the ending to *Dirty Sweet* presented itself. Up till that moment I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. Now it's closer to just no idea.

The best Irish crime novel is ...?

The Whore Mother by Shaun Herron – despite the title (and it not being technically a crime novel. Also the story 'Black Hoodie' in Roddy Doyle's *The Deportees*).

What Irish crime novel would make a great movie?

Could I make this an Irish-Canadian novel and say Brian Moore's *The Revolution Script*?

Worst / best thing about being a writer?

The best thing is when a scene is really working, when all the parts come together and it reads exactly like I want it to. The worst part is when a scene isn't working.

The pitch for your next novel is ...?

A late-'70's rock band, The High, reunite to play the casino nostalgia circuit – and rob a few along the way (I tried out some characters in flash fiction on www.muzzleflashfiction.net).

Who are you reading right now?

Mario Puzo and Linwood Barclay.

The three best words to describe your own writing are ...?

Sex. Violence. Profanity.



This interview was conducted by Peter Rozovsky and appeared on the website *Detectives Beyond Borders*, October, 2008.

1) To what extent is your fiction a portrait of Toronto? To what degree, if any, do you try to create a Toronto of the imagination, as so many others have done for New York, Los Angeles and so on?

A big extent. It was really my intention to write a book about Toronto. In fact, when I started writing *Dirty Sweet* I wasn't thinking about writing a crime novel, I really wanted to write something about what I saw as Toronto's main characteristic – that it was a city of opportunity. Having a murder set things off was the easiest way I could find to then follow a diverse group of characters that all tried to benefit from the situation.

I was after as complete a picture of the city as I could get. The other day a friend of mine paraphrased the science fiction writer, A.E. van Vogt, something about, 'don't save anything for the next book, put everything you've got into the one you're working on,' and that's certainly what I did. And still do. I wrote *Dirty Sweet* as a kind of last resort – I had been sidetracked by screenplays for years and that kind of writing is all about compromise and getting notes from so many different sources (producers, director, distributor, in Canada Telefilm give you notes, sometimes a provincial agency, usually a TV broadcaster is in on it, too...) so when I finally came to my sense and decided to just write exactly what I wanted it had to be a novel.

2) What difficulties, if any, do Canadian crime writers have breaking through in the U.S.? In Canada?

Canadian writers, especially crime writers, I think, often get bad advice, particularly about setting. I had a few agents tell me that a book set in Canada would never sell outside of Canada and Canada was too small a market to be stuck in. I've always thought of crime writers and their cities, not their countries; Robert B. Parker – Boston, Ian Rankin – Edinburgh, James Ellroy – LA, Louise Penny – Three Pines, so the country of origin never seemed important to me, but the attitude persists.

I think when people follow that advice and set their books some place they don't know well they run the risk of having a main 'character' being underdeveloped. We may also have a tendency in Canada to worry about a *shandze fer de goyim*, worry about looking bad in front of the rest of the world. All part of that Canadian insecurity thing. I'm still waiting to find out if Canada is mature enough for a warts and all look at itself.

So that's the problem getting published. By now, though, I think there have been enough Canadian successes like Louise Penny and Giles Blunt to put an end to the setting issue so, we have the 'breaking through' problem. That's just as tough as getting published, I think. So far the break through Canadian writers in Canada have been of the 'lone detective solves the crime' genre, like Louise, Giles and Peter Robinson and they have written very consistent series. Louise started out with a big success her first book, it may have taken Giles a couple or three to really get going and Peter Robinson spent quite a few years and many books paving the way for the rest. I think in most cases in crime fiction producing a steady supply of books is almost as important as producing really good books. It takes a while to build an audience and to be found by readers.

Canada, as in most things, is somewhat in between the American and British sensibilities so that complicates things.

I think the only way to approach all this is to ignore it, just not think about it and write books that you really like yourself. The old cliches are true in this case, write the best book you can, the book you want to read and then write another one...

3) *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* has multiple protagonists. Why is this attractive for an author? The ensemble approach will naturally evoke thoughts of Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novels. What, if anything, do those books mean to you as a reader and a writer?

I have to admit to also being very influenced by TV shows like *NYPD Blues*, *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*, which even if they don't know it, were influenced by the 87th precinct books (I don't know for sure, but I'd guess that Bochco was familiar with the books before he created *Hill Street Blues*).

As a reader, I still have a lot of the 87th Precinct books to read but I just read Ed McBain's short story collection, *Learning to Kill*, and it's really, really good. As a writer I learned so much from the way the characters are all so well-developed in just a few words and what an incredible eye for a story he has.

Maybe it's odd that TV writers and producers seem to have taken to Ed McBain's ensemble idea a lot more than novelists and publishers. Maybe readers prefer the single protagonist more than TV viewers. I have felt lately that many crime writers are under-appreciated as character writers because those characters develop over many books. Most reviews are of a single book so the focus seems to be more about plot than character – but taking the series as a whole, and this is even more so for Ed McBain's 87th Precinct books, the characters are very well-developed. Maybe that's why crime writers have to wait till their dead to get the critical investigations of their work they deserve, the academics have to be sure the work is complete.

4) *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* leaves a number of subplots unresolved. What does this add?

I hope it adds the readers' imaginations.

And, you know, real life is complicated and doesn't always work out and there are no easy answers or simple solutions, so there shouldn't be in art, either. I thought it would be cheating to wrap everything up. I hope that if anything good can come out of the recent financial crisis in the US it's that maybe we'll start to see the end of the era of offering easy answers to very complicated situations.

5) The shift in power from Montreal to Toronto is a major theme in *Dirty Sweet* and a source of pathos, too. I'd like you to talk about that great demographic movement and what it means to you and to your writing.

It's probably one of the most significant and under-written about things to happen to Canada in the last thirty years. I'm not sure if there's irony in it being kicked off by a “silent revolution” or not, but we don't talk about it very much and almost no art in this country – movies, TV or books anyway – talks

about it at all.

For both Montreal and Toronto I see it as both good and bad. Montreal in the 1970's was a fantastic place to be. From Expo 67 to the Olympics in 1976 it was all optimism. It seemed like the Canadiens won the Stanley Cup every year and the Expos joined the National League and improved every year. When the Parti Quebecois got elected in 1976 things changed overnight for us working class English. Suddenly we no longer existed. The official government line was that every English person in the province was rich and lived in Westmount. That combined with a worldwide downturn in the economy really ended the era of optimism. Montreal seemed to clear out and immigration dried up. I went to Alberta for a few years but I returned to Montreal and lived there through the 80's. It wasn't always fun and, of course, I missed the Montreal of the early 70's just like I missed being a carefree teenager with my whole life ahead of me.

At the same time, a lot of those people who left Montreal went to Toronto. At that time Toronto was a very Victorian, protestant, white city. The joke in Montreal, of course, was that Toronto had no nightlife at all, and that wasn't far from the truth. But that all changed. In addition to people moving in from Montreal – almost the whole movie business that sprang up in Toronto was built by guys like Robert Lantos from Montreal – a large amount of immigration that previously would have gone to Montreal went to Toronto.

So, on the one hand, by living in Toronto I really benefit from that new vibrancy but sometimes I wonder what would have happened to Montreal if it had continue to grow and become as international as Toronto has.

On the whole, I feel we've come through most of our rather mild 'troubles' and now have two pretty vibrant cities, so I see the benefits to both. Two cities of a good size and very different.

For my writing, though, I think it gave me the chance to be an outsider. The movement in Montreal and Quebec was all about becoming, "Maitres chez nous," masters of our own house, and that clearly meant people like me from the Irish working-class (and other non-Quebecois backgrounds, Jewish, Italian, Caribbean) were something else. Then, coming to Toronto I was again an outsider but in Toronto most people are.

6) Every great crime-fiction city in the United States – Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, San Francisco – is a city of immigrants. So is the Toronto you write about. How does your Toronto differ from those U.S. cities? How is it similar?

Some of it, I guess, is just the difference between the American melting pot and the Canadian mosaic.

I'm not a very well-travelled guy, I haven't even been to all four of those cities but I've certainly read books set in all of them. So, Toronto is different in that immigration is different today. When my father's family came from Ireland almost a hundred years ago they were the typical peniless immigrants and never once went back. Many immigrants today arrive with trades and professions and keep in touch with 'back home' a lot more. Remember when you were a kid and your parents made a big deal out of a long distance phone call? Those days are gone.

The good thing about this is that immigrants in Toronto can maintain a connection to their cultures which I think means that there's less of a feeling of strangeness and of being cut loose from the things

that make people who they are.

Now, some people complain, of course, that this makes people less, "Canadian," but I don't really see much evidence of that. I think people can be many things at the same time.

7) Your fiction pokes fun at the fatuous gospel of management-speak, used alike by gangsters, businessmen and police. Share your feelings on this subject, if you would.

I do find management speak funny. But I also see it as a sign of the ideology of the business world taking over everything - even though we know it doesn't really work for even all businesses, never mind for police work - and I like to point that out.

I also find it kind of funny that business sometimes talk in the language of gangsters -- all that tough-guy, corporate machismo. I guess it's true, people always want what they can't have. Gangsters want to be businessmen and businessmen want to be gangsters. Cops make great characters as they are stuck in the middle like the rest of us.

8) Many contemporary crime authors chronicle changing cities. You are among the few who do this without bitter nostalgia or a stark anti-developer stance. Why is this? If you can answer the question without eating up too much bandwidth, what is your take on Toronto's changes of the last three decades?

Yeah, I've already been a lot more long-winded than I should. Maybe I've even already covered a lot of this. Toronto needs development because so many people are moving in all the time. I like the idea of people moving in, they bring so much to the city. Development is always an issue when cities grow, but I think it's important to be honest with yourself and make sure you're upset about the buildings and not about the people. I like old buildings and I wish we'd keep more of them, but I'd rather have all these new people, even if it means some ugly buildings and some growing pains.

There are some real challenges in having a city grow as much as Toronto has in the last thirty years - and with the people coming in from all over the world - but it is really a microcosm of what the world is going through so we better find a way to make it work. For the most part Toronto does work, but we can't simply ignore the stuff that doesn't and I think that's a little bit of where crime fiction comes in.

9) *Dirty Sweet* has a notable similarity with *The Big O* by your fellow Harcourt author Declan Burke, that of a youngish couple on the run. You also shared an editor at Harcourt, Stacia Decker. I'd like to switch gears and talk about what role an editor's sensibilities has in acquiring, shaping and delivering books.

It gets even weirder. In *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere* and *The Big O* there are women named Karen and Sharon involved in illegal activities who each meet a shady guy named Ray.

The editor's sensibilities is key. Before my books got to Stacia at Harcourt they were published by a small press in Canada called ECW, run by a guy named Jack David. I really felt it unlikely that anyone would publish *Dirty Sweet* because it falls between a lot of cracks - it's not really a mystery, it's not really literary fiction it's not really a thriller. When I asked Jack why he, and my editor at ECW,

Michael Holmes, wanted the book Jack said it was because they liked it. He said, "All we have in this business is our judgement."

For all the big-business, interantional mega corporation stuff about publishing, it still comes down to individual taste. Stacia Decker picked up books by me, Declan Burke, Al Guthrie and Ray Banks. I'm absolutely thrilled to be on that list.

In some ways this goes back to that management-speak stuff. The multinationls can use all the techniques from other businesses they want, but the only way to sell books is one at a time. Editors have to trust their own judgement, acquire books they really like and then hope other people will, too. I don't know if there's any connection to the fact that my books and Declan's were originally published by small presses.

I'm thrilled when people like my books and I want to thank each and every person. And thank you, Peter, for such a tough interview. I'm afraid it was probably a lot more interesting for me than for people reading this as I think I learned a lot more about my own books than anyone else will from my disjointed answers.

