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A Novel by

James J. Klekowski

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FRIDAY

I don't know when I'll be able forget the look on Vic Hanley's face when we parted company last night outside of Steve's Lounge. Somewhere between a father's pride and a prosecutor's closing argument. I'm sure it answered a lot of questions he'd wanted put to rest across the years with me, but to all come at once was probably too much, even for a police lieutenant. No doubt there was some disappointment there, too, along with an acknowledgement that I wasn't a kid anymore. Maybe I drank one too many. With Vic down, only Lynn to go off my short list of the people who needed a heads up from me before Saturday morning.

As usual Lynn had left early for the office, another busy day ahead for her, too, but the note she had posted to the bathroom mirror before she left was intriguing. It suggested I should interview one Maria Sosa, a new secretary in the alderman's office. Who's Maria Sosa?

No set plans 'til the afternoon left the morning open for self-improvement and deep thoughts. I worked out my usual regimen of weight training on the free weight set-up in the living room, topped off with a run around Cal Park. The lake. That beautiful shimmering, endless lake! It's why Native Americans settled here, why early settlers crossing the country stopped and made this their home. I've often wondered how suburbanites survive without seeing this view every day. To think so much of this lakefront was kept from the people for more than a century astounds me, but industry ruled back then, I guess. Take a look at the lakefront of Gary, Indiana for an example of what I'm talking about.

The last time I saw Leon Perez alive kept creeping back into the light in my skull, the day I gave him the keys to the apartment, where he would later be murdered. In my building. Bouncing around between relatives and girlfriends after getting booted out of his mom's trailer hadn't worked out for Leon, so he gave me a call. Was I supposed to say 'no'?

We met up at La Cienega on Ewing, in what used to be the neighborhood Jewel grocery store back in the '60's, converted to a Mexican grocery store in the '70's when the 'new' Jewel/Osco superstore was completed on East 106th Street. Of course that Jewel shut down in the year 2012 when the 'W' megastore opened just across the border in a place once called Robie, Indiana. Try finding that on a map today! The new owners on Ewing knew what their customers liked, providing what we'd consider exotic produce, but to their shoppers this was a little taste of Mexico. They also installed a fresh-made hot food counter in the back.

We ate lunch there, on me, as I've always had a thing for Mexican food. Leon had *carnitas y frijoles* and I had a pair of *quesadillas con queso solo y arroz y frijoles*. We also split an order of *guacamole*, which is always better freshly made, and washed it all down with a pair of refreshing *agua de horchatas*, a rice water drink. From the name and main ingredient you'd expect a starchy taste or texture in the drink, but since I first tried it years ago I've found *agua de horchatas* to be sweet, light and smooth, but not too much of any one of them.

The pair of cooks at La Cienega can whip up a great lunch in short order! Breaking bread with friends has always been a secret pleasure for me. Not being much of a cook, I've had to rely on restaurant food for any kind of complex meal, since I struck out on my own. Except when Lynn did the cooking.

Afterwards we drove over to the apartment on East 95th and I showed Leon the small, efficiency second floor layout. Since the place was already simply furnished, it was an ideal fit for my friend. As usual, he was very open about himself, sharing things I'd be hard-pressed to say out loud. He would be turning 47 years old later in the year and knew his early exploits were catching up with him health-wise.

His teeth had started falling out a few years back, but now he was experiencing cramps in his chest pectorals, describing it as if his heart was skipping beats. Leon was also having terrible night sweats, blood in his eyes and the lymph nodes in his neck swelling up from time to time.

As he put it, “I’ve got two good molars left that I chew with, so as long as I don’t smile I’m okay. No one can tell I’m just rotting away inside.”

I didn’t feel sorry for the guy, and he wasn’t looking for sympathy, he was too real for that crap. Leon just needed a place to crash. He said he was off drugs for good and didn’t even drink anymore, but the memories were still there. When he had tried drinking some liquor recently his blood pressure went through the roof, so he knew that kind of a life was in the past.

He reasoned with himself that the can, that carburetor cleaning junk, had probably destroyed his liver and kidneys across the years of his youth when he was snorting the stuff and now had taken aim on his brain. It was about this time in the conversation that Leon asked if his younger brother, Ernesto, could crash with him from time to time. I thought it was a very good idea, Ernesto being the most stable member of his immediate family that I’d met so far.

Leon joked that he didn’t even get a morning hard-on anymore, and reasoned with himself that sex wasn’t everything. He had had a good sex life, nothing to complain about. He had a good laugh over that. As guys often do with other guys, he probably shared too much when he let me know that he had shaved downstairs the day before and had nicked up his *bolos* real good! Having never ‘trimmed the carpet’ myself, I let it go to personal hygiene choices. But I had to ask, what had that last heavy-set girlfriend of his got out of their relationship? He had another good laugh.

“You know me, Nick, that chick catered to my needs perfectly. She was just my type, submissive and cute! But her family didn’t approve, so after a while out on my ass I went!” Typical for Wicho, I ask about his girlfriend’s needs and he goes on about his own!

After a shower and shave I drove over to The Trim on East 106th Street for a haircut and floorshow. It’s a six-seat barber shop with leather couch, chairs along the window side for the customers, many trophies of locally sponsored teams in the windows and a high table and chairs for the staff. There’s usually some waiting time expected

because of its popularity, particularly on Fridays and Saturdays. Date nights.

There are also a pair of flat screen TV's, with one endlessly airing some cable sports channel, while the other was permanently set on loud, sexy music videos. The walls had the usual items you'd expect in a barber shop: rate cards, photo examples of hair styles available for the asking, erotic artwork and personal items collected by the cutters themselves, exposing their own unique identities.

As usual, the conversations between the cutters revolved around women troubles, car troubles, gossip about each other's women and cars, and the occasional topics of local politics and community affairs. I took a seat to the right of the entrance. Manny usually cut my hair and he gave me an acknowledging nod and smile when I sat down. Rio was another cutter on this side of the shop. The third chair wasn't manned as yet.

From previous conversations I had overheard waiting my turn, I'd found out that the core of the cutters who worked here and co-owned the shop were once high school friends who had built their business up from an eight foot wide storefront space on Ewing with just two barber's chairs. They worked together, ate lunches together and often partied together after work, stag and with their girlfriends, club-hopping as you'd expect single guys in their mid to late twenties to behave.

A few of the add-ons who started cutting here since the move to the new space were older guys in their thirties, a couple of them were married and had families. The cutters were Latinos, as were most of their young clientele. All were southeast siders for most of their lives, though a few had settled in the south suburbs.

"How come you didn't make it to the club last night, Serge?" Manny asked one of the two cutters already working on customers' hair on the left side of the shop. "You missed a show, bro!"

"I wuz gonna go, man, but you know my old lady, she's getting' sick of watchin' me get drunk ev'ry time we're out!" Sergio replied, not taking his eyes off the top of his customer's head.

Rio made the sound of a cracking whip and everyone in the place had a good laugh. "Have you ever thought 'a not drinkin' so much, niggah?"

"The place was packed for a Thursday night, I couldn't believe it, you know?" Manny continued. "We got in the VIP lounge for most of the time. Only Chavo couldn't hold his liquor, man!"

"I know! Shit! I turn around and he's back in the john again!" Juan agreed. "That's probably why he's late!" Everybody had another laugh. Chavo was one of the newer cutters.

"All night long, it just goes right through him!" Manny confirmed. "He should get his kidneys checked out."

"Or his nose cleaned out!" Rio considered, getting a good-sized laugh.

"Hey, you know my lady's not like all that, man," unprompted, Sergio stuck up for his girlfriend. "She's gotta work today, she can't be out weeknights all the time."

"Did you even get lucky with that dancer that had her head in your lap, niggah?" Juan asked Manny.

"I wasn't lookin' to get lucky, niggah!" Manny replied, giving me a heads up to jump ahead of a high school boy also sitting to the right of the doorway, immersed in his iPhone. I sat down in the modern barber chair after Manny had swept up from the previous customer. He swung an oversized black coverlet over me and let it settle across my lap, tightly securing it at the back of my neck with Velcro. "The usual?"

"Yup! White guy haircut, please!" I announced, Manny giving a snicker to my usual reply.

"She puts up with a lot from me, man," Sergio continued. "Remember last year when she had that operation?" he asked no one in particular. "Man, I didn't get any for weeks!"

"You didn't get any from that, Manny?" Juan wanted to know. "I wuz sure you got some! Aww, man!"

"Hey, I get enough of what I want when I want it, don't worry about my boys, niggah!" Manny laughed it off, wetting my hair and starting to hand trim the hair on the side of my head, gathering up a row of hair between two of his fingers, cutting the longer ends of hair

that extended past his fingers' width with a pair of sharp scissors. He repeated the process to his satisfaction during the conversation, and then started again on the other side of my head, with his other hand.

"Yeah, whatchu gonna get on that motorcycle of yours, niggah?" Rio asked Juan, the youngest of the cutters. That brought a smile across Juan's baby face.

"I get some, okay man? Okay! Remember that time after the concert at Excalibur's? You 'member that Puerto Rican chick? The redhead?" Juan defended his honor, making the international sign of the curves of a shapely woman with one hand while combing his customer's hair with the other.

"I remember her, man, we all thought she was a chick with a dick!" Rio got the house cutters laughing out loud. "You got some a that, niggah?"

Chavo came through the door, everybody razzing his tardiness. After making the rounds fist-bumping each member of the crew present and a few customers awaiting his arrival, he headed over to his post, the third chair on the right side of the establishment, next to Manny's chair, carrying a lunch bag along.

"You feelin' right, Chavo?" Rio asked. "You look a little off-color." Snickers from the other cutters.

"I'm fine," Chavo let him know. "Just forgot the bridge was out on Torrence." He checked his phone for messages he may have missed between his car and his chair and pulled out a charger from a counter drawer under his mirror. Manny and Rio exchanged looks of surprised disbelief.

"You forgot the bridge was out?" Rio asked incredulously. "The bridge that's been out for a year already?"

"I can't help how long it's been out, man. I just forgot it wasn't there," Chavo explained. With a pair of scissors looming above my head I tried not to shake from the laughter inside me. Chavo took his bag of food and stepped over to the table, sitting down to eat his lunch, oblivious to everything else.

"She puts up with a lot from me, man," Sergio continued, "all the cheating, the arguments, her family. My mother! So I know she's the one, right?"

“They blew the thing up months ago, man! You forgot that?” Rio wanted to know.

“If she had a dick, man, I couldn’t find it!” Juan admitted proudly, “*Y mi lengua* looked all night long!” Juan spoke out that last line with a heavy false accent, like a Mel Blanc animated character.

Chavo looked up from his food. “That’s disgusting, niggah! I’m tryin’ ta eat here!”

“You don’t know where that Rican thing’s been, niggah! Puttin’ your tongue all over it!” Rio suggested.

Juan waved it off with a free hand. “How about Miller going down?” Juan asked his fellow cutters. “That got some TV coverage for the locals, man! They didn’t show half his head got blown off, though!”

“What barber is gonna miss a bald man? Shit!” Rio stated more than asked. The crew had a short, uncomfortable laugh.

“His boys tried to shake us down more than once when we were still on Ewing. Fuckin’ campaign contributions, they said! Fuck him!” Manny spoke up. I got kinda worried at his excitement since he was holding a straight edge razor beside my skin, trimming the line of hair around my ear with short strokes.

Rio’s cell phone, sitting on the table behind him, rang with an electronic ‘Rock-A-Bye-Baby’ tune playing. A few of the boys started mocking the music. He checked who was calling, “One a my honeys!” and answered, holding the phone up to his ear with one shoulder, freeing up both his hands to continue cutting his customer’s hair. Didn’t miss a beat.

“Check out the photos online from *Baja Negra*!” Juan had searched the Internet for images from Wednesday morning, showing his customer, a high school kid, what he’d found and was saving on his phone.

“Holy shit!” the kid exclaimed, as Juan held his phone close to the boy, so he could get a good look at Joey Miller’s head-wound.

“One of these days the cops are gonna pull your ass over and check out all the shit you’ve got on that phone, niggah, and they’re gonna toss you in jail!” Rio pointed out the danger of keeping

salacious materials on a personal communications device, which was news to Juan. “Don’t call me for bail money, boy!”

“Its mostly porn!” Juan bragged and got back to finishing up his young customer’s look, adding a dollop of mousse to the boy’s hair.

“Yeah, gay porn!” Manny tossed in, giving Rio a look and a beat.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that!” Manny and Rio said in unison, with everybody else in the place having a good laugh at the old Seinfeld reference.

With his connections to the suburban mob syndicate firmly established, in his early 30’s, Joey Miller ambitiously sought to expand their traditional territories for drug and vice distribution back into the south side of the city by consolidating the South Chicago gangs into one unit, which was a fete no previous criminal, nor law enforcement official for that matter, had either considered or attempted. It did not go well, for the first few years anyway, with loose cannons going off everywhere, but eventually his patience, menace and persistence paid off. He did have the unwitting help of the Chicago Police Department in ‘cleaning up’ the streets of the criminal element, which made it that much easier to put his own criminal element in place and on top. How many rank and file cops were injured or killed as a consequence, I don’t know. What Joey didn’t have for a long time, was an alderman’s office in his pocket. That was going to take an as yet unknown element.

Gangs were not something new or exclusive to South Chicago, as University of Chicago studies in the 1920’s listed extensive gang activities throughout the city, with emphasis on this community. Their methods would come into question years later when somebody figured out that all the researchers did was drive or walk around the neighborhood, spot a group of kids standing around on a street corner and label them a gang. Something Chicago Police Department officials would be accused of as well here and around the city, across the decades.

It took serious effort, legal and otherwise, to keep Joey’s suburban connections under wraps and off the books. The old guard

police knew who he really was, in the city and out, but only a few people in the press had a clue, and only a handful of them lived down here. For a lot of people, NIMBY, not in my backyard, still counts for something. So Joey could play the local hero to the Chicago organizations and powers he needed under his thumb, passing out dirty money like a drunken sailor, and still answer to his suburban syndicate masters. Having a politician or two tucked away would be a major feather. He never could get a stronghold on any previous alderman in the 10th Ward, but if he could get in with an up and coming guy, things could work in his favor. Miller didn't bother with the direct approach; he had some 'in' with the power behind the potential throne sitter. It's here I draw a blank, as to why the Coronado matriarch would risk her own son's career and the family dynasty by bringing Joey and Tony together. Is power that intoxicating?

After my entertaining haircut, I got in the Lincoln and drove to Indianapolis Boulevard taking a left, towards South Chicago. On the way I speed-dialed the 10th Ward office, making an appointment with Maria Sosa to talk, during her lunch hour, at the Service about 1 pm. Nice voice, young. I wondered what she looked like. Once on Commercial, I parked across the street from Rewer's Camera, 8944 South C.

Opened in 1957 in a former funeral parlor, which explained the canopy above the entrance, Rewer's was a staple in the community, and the only fully equipped camera shop south of Hyde Park. I remember all the Kodak paraphernalia the place had in its glass window cases when I was a kid. Mom had a camera bug, taking shots of every activity her children got involved in, from cub scouts to school plays and every family trip and holiday gathering in between. My siblings and I treasure those images now.

With the advent of phone cameras and the meltdown at Kodak, the current owner had to reinvent the place or close for good. He expanded his in-house services like film-to-video transfers, added discounts on printing and enlargement orders, and equipment rentals

for weddings and baptisms. He also served a mean cup of java, turning a part of the place into a petite café, complete with new-age instrumental music playing all the time.

Sean Keaton, 36, a Black entrepreneur and local success story, another product of Bowen High giving his childhood ‘hood a chance, was in the rear of his shop when I entered. A bell attached to the doorframe rang out when the door opened.

“Hey, Sean!” I called towards the back of the place.

“Hey, Nick! Want a cup a coffee?”

“You’re a mind reader!”

“Comin’ up!” I could see he had a customer at the magazine rack, so I sat down in the café area facing the entrance and checked my phone. I didn’t have a long wait. “You still takin’ it black, right?” Sean placed the oversized orange Rachel Ray coffee cup and green Rachel Ray saucer on my round table, looking like it was a Paris escapee.

“Like your men, Sean! Thanks.” We shared a laugh.

“Hey, those prints you e-mailed in yesterday are ready. You want to take Polish Joe’s order with you, too?” Sean stepped behind the counter.

“Yeah, I’ll grab ‘em both, thanks.” His other customer had stepped up to the counter with a purchase. It was B. J. King. We exchanged looks. I turned back to the doorway. “You lettin’ anybody in here now, huh Sean?”

“You two boys wanna wrassle you can step on outside. In my joint we keep it cool. Okayee?” Sean sensed the tension between Brent and me and had probably heard all about B. J.’s dip in the lake on Wednesday. From the swimmer’s mouth, no doubt.

After paying for his purchase, a couple of photo magazines, B. J. took a seat at my small table, setting down his cup of coffee, a pair of new cameras dangling from around his neck on black straps. “Afternoon, Daniels.”

“Brent. How’s tricks?” I asked. Sean quickly joined us. How do you separate two combatants at a round table?

“You will both play nice in my shop, thank you. I don’t want to have to start a wall of shame, gentlemen!” Brent and I exchanged glances.

“You’re looking well, Nick.” Off to a good start.

“You’re looking dry, Brent.” I checked my watch. Almost one.

“Now was that so hard?” Sean gave us both a fed up look and got up as another customer had entered.

“You know you’re Black Beach shots of Joey Miller are getting passed around the Internet? How’d you get them back from the depths of the sea?”

“Hired some skinny white kids on their daddy’s jet ski. Cost me a twenty! That’s why I try to get as much up front for my captures as I can from the news syndicates. A day later they ain’t worth shit, nothing anybody shoots is anymore. It’s on everybody else’s phone. And Christmas cards. Fucking Internet.”

“New cameras?”

“Gotta be ready for anything out there! Know what I’m sayin’?”

“Have you looked into underwater housing for those things?” We both laughed out loud. Finishing the last of my coffee, I got up to leave. “I gotta go.”

“We cool now?”

“Mm hmm.”

“Sorry ‘bout your friend. I didn’t use any of his stuff, anyways.”

“Thanks. Me too, Brent.” I waved ‘goodbye’ to Sean, with the print order bags in my hand, and stepped outside.

I had to squint from the sunshine, fumbling with my sunglasses. I started to step out into traffic towards my car on the other side of the street, when that all-too familiar black Pontiac GTO zoomed past, within a couple feet of me. Damn! I could make out the back of Bernard’s head in the driver’s seat and Eduardo giving me a puzzled look thru the rear window. What the hell was that was about?

As their speeding car passed the intersection at 90th Street, shots rang out. I ducked down, not knowing if they were meant for me, or what! Traffic at the scene seemed to all simultaneously screech to a halt as the black muscle car continued southbound. When I stood up I could see people rushing to the sidewalk on my side of the street.

Somebody was down! I ran over, through the small crowd forming around a young Latino, probably late teens, wearing some army surplus clothing, trying to stand, but obviously wounded in a leg and an arm. Blood splattered on the cement surface, with three shiny bullet casings highlighting the area of sidewalk the crowd was avoiding. His reddish brown hair stood out in the early afternoon sun. A couple of people already had their phones out, capturing images of the scene. I hoped somebody was dialing 9-1-1. A siren sounded in the distance, but was getting closer. This kid would survive, but why was he their target? I didn't know him from anywhere. The sound of gunfire had also drawn out B. J. King and his cameras, clicking furiously at everything in sight.

Leaving my car parked where it was I sprinted the block north to the Service office. The police had already prepared the area for the expected crowds at Joey's wake at Kuzniar's funeral parlor in a couple of hours, wooden blue horses lining the sidewalk halfway up 88th Street and from what I could see, half of 87th Street, too, like on a parade day. My phone rang. It was Vic Hanley. "Hey Vic!"

"Dano! Here's a heads up! Your school chums got an APB out on their sorry selves!"

"Eduardo and Bernie?"

"Yup!"

"They just shot a kid on 90th and Commercial a minute ago! They're headed southbound right now!" I screamed in the phone.

"Shit!" I could hear Vic barking orders to his subordinates as he hung up. At that very moment three police squads zoomed past, heading to the shooting, and beyond it, after my high school chums. I didn't get the chance to ask Vic, what was the APB, all points bulletin, issued for? Before I stepped inside the office, I looked at all the people looking from their doorways and second floor windows down Commercial to the commotion. Real life still trumps everything else.

"Nick, you have a young lady waiting in the interview office," Louise let me know, nodding a look towards the glassed-in space. One of her grandsons was helping out at the office for the meeting

today, hovering around Louise's desk. I was pretty sure it was Darrell, oldest son of her oldest son. Kids grow up so fast.

"Right! Thanks! Hey, Darrell!" I acknowledged, hurriedly stepping over to my desk, pulling out the laptop to check the police bulletin website.

I quickly scanned the updated site for any information... The APB was issued for the arrest of Eduardo Z and Bernard P as persons of interest in connection with the Leon Perez murder!! I sat down, looking across the room at Louise. She once again indicated the interview office with that exasperated face only she could make.

"Right!" I picked up my notepad and walked over to the glassed-in enclosure. "Hi, I'm Nick Daniels." She held out her hand, remaining seated.

"Maria. Maria Sosa." I got a small electrical charge when our hands met. "Thank you for seeing me." I closed the office door.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, there was an incident down the street a moment ago." I sat down, indicated my notepad. "Do you mind?"

"No."

"Maria, why are you here?" She was quite a lovely, not too petite Latina, light in complexion, hair almost a shade of reddish brown, with a white ribbon in it. Where have I seen her before?

"I read your blog, the one from Wednesday night. About Joey Miller."

I knew where this was going. "As a writer for the Service, Maria, I appreciate hearing from the readers, I really do. I know that some of the comments I made may have seemed pretty cold-hearted, or -"

"He was my father. At least I think so." Silence. I didn't know where this was going. I had to think.

"How can you -"

"Be sure? I'm not. My mother, our mother, has never told us who our father really was, my twin brother Angel and me."

"Then, Maria, why would you think that Joey Miller, of all people, would be your father?" She unfolded a document, a copy of a birth certificate, Puerto Rican registry, in Spanish. She handed it to me. *Joseph Miller, Ciudad de Chicago, Estados Unidos*, was listed as

the father of Angel and Maria Sosa, and the U. S. as the father's country of origin.

"My mother doesn't know I have this. It belongs with her papers. I have to put it back." I handed the paper back to Maria. "Whether its true or not, I think she used it to get a job for me in the alderman's office a couple of months ago, about the time my brother started some other kind of work for Mr. Miller. Not in the office, but on the west side, Cicero, I think."

I realized I was staring at her when she began to look a little uncomfortable from my silence. She looked... familiar somehow.

"Where would your mother have met him?"

"I don't know, Mr. Daniels, she doesn't talk about it to us, but when the news came out on Wednesday morning, my mother, well, she was upset about it, like nothing before, and with Angel not coming home since - "

Holy shit! I know where I saw her before! The kid that was just shot!

"Since?"

"And then, your story came out and my mother cursed! I never heard her curse before, Mr. Daniels! It scared me! Not because of what you wrote, but she cursed him and I thought, so I found this, I seen it before but not in a long time. I knew what it was but not what it meant, you know?"

"I'm sorry if my story hurt your mother in any way, Maria. Does your brother have an army style shirt and fatigues he likes to wear?"

"No, your story was right, and good. That's what I had to tell you. I know your story is the truth. I wanted to thank you, Mr. Daniels. But how did you know about Angel wearing that silly outfit?"

"May I make a copy of your document? Not for publication, but for my own records, please?" Maria handed the birth certificate back to me. I dashed out of the inner office and made a copy, leaving it on my desk, calling Darrell over, and returning the original to Maria.

"Maria, I'm going to have Darrell drive you to the South Chicago Hospital emergency room." She quickly stood, unsure. "That incident I spoke of, down the street? I think it was your brother that was shot,

but not seriously, from what I saw.” She kept it together as I walked her towards the door. “He stood up and was able to walk around, so, the ambulance would have taken him to the nearest hospital - ”

“I have to go there now, please!” Maria said with a genuine urgency.

Darrell’s coupe was parked in front of the office and he had it in gear by the time I helped Maria into the passenger side, closing the door for her. They pulled away and took a left at 88th Street. I could see the press already setting up camera stands on the Immaculate Conception staircase, getting ready for what seemed more than likely was her father’s wake. At that moment, B. J. King walked past the Service office on his way to Kuzniar’s.

“Daniels! Did you get wind of what happened at Kuzniar’s funeral parlor?” I shook my head. “That kid that got shot? They caught him messin’ with Miller’s body!”

“Who caught him doing what with Miller’s body?”

“Joey’s boys! Eduardo and Bernie, man! I don’t know what the kid was doin’ but it got them fuckin’ pissed off! Hey, who was that cute chick you put in that car just now?”

“Just another satisfied customer, Brent.”

“Gotta go! Catch you later!” He walked on further north; I was about to step back inside the office, when I caught someone out of the corner of my eye, watching from across the street. He was partially hidden behind a van and turned away when he saw that I was looking back. I ducked inside, watching for a moment or two out the window, then got back to my desk, Louise following my every move from her own desk.

“It’s gonna be one of them days around here! Mm Hmm!” she said, shaking her head.

The city big wigs started arriving early for the event, limos and caddies and a few Hummers dropping off city and county commissioners, aldermen, department heads and other elected officials, all coming together to attend a wake for who they thought was one of their own. I couldn’t help but wonder how many of them

came just to be sure Joey Miller was dead, rather than mourn his passing? I'd be in that line myself if I cared enough to walk into Kuzniar's, which I did not. Instead, I hung out almost directly across the street with the newsies and photographers on the steps of the Immaculate Conception BVM church, my dad's childhood parish, listening in on a few conversations, participating in a few others, and trying to dig up something on what had happened inside the funeral parlor. Brent was there, but he had grabbed a choice spot and had settled in to do his thing.

Established in 1882, Immaculate Conception BVM Church was the first Polish Roman Catholic church to open on the southeast side, the first of its kind south of the Chicago River. Completed in 1899, the church building was designed by Martin A. Carr in a monumental renaissance revival style. It's a prime example of the so-called Polish cathedral style of churches, in both its grand scale and opulence.

I've seen historic photographs at the museum of what the original altar looked like, draped in statuary on columned platforms, surrounding the central image, a larger-than-life statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Some older people who remember the original altar curse the day when Vatican II came to town and changed everything. Immaculate's most recent restoration, completed in 2002, included new altars designed by Franck & Lohsen of Washington, D.C. and a new plaza to the north, which gets a lot of use from its parishioners.

The on-camera reporters were lined up in the parking lane under the growing shadow of the church tower, practicing their intros, being sure to maintain enough space between themselves and rival station on-air talent so as not to overhear the others when they went 'live'. Very territorial. Most of the local networks were represented, including the Spanish language channels. I didn't know Miller was so popular in the Mexican community. All their tower trucks and vans lined both sides of 88th Street west of Commercial. What a circus!

The police kept the whole thing under control. They all knew, and were told by their commanding officers more than once, that they were under 'The Eye'. The mayor himself would be arriving within the hour to pay his official respects. I spotted a contingent of 10th Ward precinct workers and people from the office, Lynn among them.

I caught up with them after they had crossed 88th Street, walking north towards Kuzniar's.

"Lynn!" She was looking around for me, too. She stepped out of the group, waving them ahead without her. A few of the office girls chose to stay close by, waiting for their boss.

"I stopped in at your office first." We embraced. "Louise said you'd be out here somewhere. Did you meet with Maria Sosa? She never made it back to work."

"Did you know what she was going to tell me?"

"Not a clue. You're the reporter," Lynn said with a smile and waved the last of her office girls on. We were going to be a while and we liked our privacy. "Are you going to join me?"

"Where?"

"Kuzniar's, of course," she said, a bit surprised.

"I'm not getting any closer than I am right now!" I was probably a little too defiant for my own good.

"You're not going to pay your last respects, Nick?"

"I've paid my last respects, in writing. You care to make a bet how many people are here to mourn Joey and how many are here to just be sure he's dead?"

"Does that include you, Nick?" Lynn was getting to a boiling point, quickly.

"I'm at the front of that second line, Lynn!" I wondered if I was turning red. "You don't know!"

"I didn't like him any more than you did, Nick, but this, what you're doing, is not the right thing to do!" By this time her office girls were backing away from this scene we were making, right across the street from the press hungry for anything.

"I've gotta go!" and Lynn stalked off, catching up with her girls, ignoring their questions. I just watched her go. I'm an idiot. My phone rang. It was the office.

"Do I need to remind you again that you're expected at the Service conference in five minutes?" Louise asked in that blistering voice that she could command in an instant.

"No, ma'am."

SHORT LINE

“We’re looking forward to your arrival then, Mr. Daniels,” and she hung up. I just stood there awhile, contemplating the mess I had made of the as yet incomplete day.

Every so often, the entire staff of the Calumet News Service would meet and talk shop. This being an extraordinary week for the southeast side and the Service, Larry Galica called everybody in to coordinate and assign coverage of everything going on or about to, leaving little to chance. Also, I figured, he was more than a little flustered at having the city press contingent literally at his doorstep, and like any proud papa, wanted us all to look and be on our best professional behavior. Besides, he got to use his Skype video conferencing paraphernalia, so he could attend the meeting without leaving the comfort and care of his bed upstairs. This technology was Darrell’s specialty, and all went well, though I thought the large screen monitors showed Larry a shade redder than usual.

The conference brought many faces and ideas together, in person and in one place, and it was nice to see everybody from the Service, kind of like a family gathering, with notepads for the old-timers like me, and iPads for everybody else. I didn’t get the chance to chitchat with my colleagues very often; maybe the Christmas party was the last time we were all in one room at the same time. I don’t always participate in the group activities around here, but it’s not like we have a softball squad.

I still had a lot of calls to return, according to my spindle. There were probably more than a few unanswered messages from my colleagues in the pile. And that invitation. I’ll get to it, okay? A couple of the younger reporters, Felicia Gonzalez among them, suggested we all get together Saturday night for dinner at Roma’s. Since I probably owed them all a call anyway, I figured agreeing to breaking bread together would make things even Steven.

The big show down the street from the Service office went off without a hitch. I don’t think the city fathers would have allowed

anything less than perfection for the cameras, or the deceased, to be remembered by. I had to wonder how many of the dignitaries prostrated themselves before the catafalque supporting the remains of their so-hailed fallen martyr? Since the press cameras were kept outside, I figured just a few, and only if they were up for reelection in a tight race. Welcome to Chicago.

The only kernel of interest I had in the interior goings on at Kuzniar's was the private meeting between his Honor, the Mayor and the Alderman of the 10th Ward of the City of Chicago, supposedly held in a back room of the establishment where the morticians kept the spare caskets and coffins for display and sale. From what I was told later on, they both entered with all smiles and back slapping, always giving good face for the public, and came out a bit disheveled, with Coronado a new shade of beige. I had to wonder, only because I'm like that sometimes, if either of them had asked the other if they wanted to try one of the crates out for size? They probably just settled their grudge match with a wrestling contest, or whipped them out to see whose was bigger. With the city's budget where it was, they should have sold tickets to the show.

Buchinski's funeral parlor in Hegewisch was a family-owned business going back decades, originally in the familiar red stone building across from the Calumet News Service office on Commercial Avenue. Its present location felt more like a home than a business, comfortable, large enough for one-at-a-time wakes, but not two. The woodwork was old world, thick and heavily varnished. I came in the side entrance, into a large foyer where several people were gathered, talking. They looked my way when I came in, but not recognizing me went back to their conversations. I weaved thru them into the main parlor, where Leon's brothers were standing beside his open casket, their mother seated in a plush high-back chair a distance back from the focal point, the deceased. A selection of floral tributes flanked the casket and candles.

"Thanks for coming, Nick." Ernesto greeted me, shaking hands, introducing me to his brothers who I hadn't seen in years.

“I’m very sorry for your loss.” Words with real meaning escape us when we need them the most. How do you comfort somebody in a situation like this?

Ernesto led me over to his seated mother, staring through her tears at her dead son. “I’m very sorry for your loss.” What else did I have? I took her hands in mine when she looked up at me.

“Mama, this is Nick Daniels, Wicho’s friend. Do you remember him?”

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Daniels. Did you know my son well?”

“As well as anyone, Mrs. Perez.” I stepped out of the way as a couple of people leaned in to greet Leon’s mother. Ernesto took me aside, introducing me to his girlfriend, a very lovely Latina who didn’t speak much English. Ernesto later told me that was the best kind of wife to have, not that he was thinking about getting married anytime soon.

The mood and lighting of the place was properly subdued. I left the way I came in after writing my name in the remembrance book and pocketing a couple of memorial cards, Leon’s smiling face from long ago on the front, when he could smile without being self-conscious. The flip side had the dates of his birth and death, and a short prayer, ending with a plug for Buchinski’s.

I stepped outside, where the heat of the day hadn’t yet dissipated, passing a few young people smoking cigarettes. As I crossed the street heading to the parking lot, I thought I caught someone watching me out of a shadow. I picked up my pace and trotted the last few steps to my car, watching behind me more than in front. No one was following, but I got the hell out of there just the same. Almost home, my phone rang. It was Vic Hanley.

“Did you put your story to bed yet, Dano?”

“Hours ago.”

“Ever wanted to shout ‘Stop the presses!’ to your editor?”

Is he kidding me? “Whatcha got, Vic?”

“The bullets pulled outta that kid this afternoon on Commercial are from the same gun that took out a tire in a bus crash twenty years

ago in Missouri, Dano. Ballistics did a rush job for me. Think that's something your readers will want to know?"

"I gotta call Larry, Vic! Thanks!" I hung up the phone and pulled the car over to a stop. I jumped out of the Lincoln and started pounding on the hood, screaming. After I drained as much of the anger as I could out of my system, I woke up Larry.

"I hope I killed that little fuck!" Eduardo Z repeated like a mantra while trying to swallow a burrito whole. At least it looked that way to his waiter, from a distance. Life on the run wasn't as much fun as it looked on TV, huh boys?

"You just wounded him, bro," Bernard P said between bites. "I think I saw him get back on his feet!"

"I shoulda blown his balls off! Who the fuck he think he wuz, man? Dissing Joey's body like that! His body! Unbelievable shit-ass prick!"

"At least we got to pay our last respects, Lalo."

"One more hit and we *vamos* this town, bro, I swear!"

Bernard's cell phone rang with the sound of an old rotary dial telephone. "'Bout time this ol' fucker calls back!" Seeing who was calling, he placed the half-eaten burrito on his plate and slid a greasy finger across the face of his smart phone, activating the device.

"Hello?" Bernard said as Eduardo leaned in to hear the conversation. "We been waitin' all day for you, man." A pause. "Yeah, I know we're hot! That's old news already! What else you got?"

"Eleven o'clock?" Bernard pulled the phone away from his head to check on its face for the time. The party on the other end continued to speak to them both. It was a man's voice, with a slight accent, European, maybe. "Yeah, we're packed! What do ya think?"

"What? Okay, where? Where? Why there?" He gave Eduardo a wise guy look, shaking his head. "Yeah, he's right here wit' me. Okay. It's gonna take us longer than ten minutes to get there, man!" Bernard took the device away from his face to disconnect. "This doesn't give us time to clean out the office 'til after, bro."

“Fuck the office!”

“Fuck the office?”

“Yeah, the cops prob’ly got it sealed, anyway, bro. Now, if we wanna be on time,” Eduardo thought out loud, “if we wanna be on time? I don’t like this whole set-up, bro. Ev’rybody knows our business, man, and we don’t get shit outta it! And what da hell are we meeting there for? A fuckin’ train yard? What are we? Stupid?? Got anyt’ing special in the car?”

“Yeah. I got a pair a Saturday nights.”

“Loaded?”

“Always.”

“What else you carrying?”

“A tank a gas. In case. And the b-e-l-l that Dwayne didn’t want to handle, man.” Bernard looked around but figured the older Mexican waiter couldn’t spell in English.

Eduardo shook his head. “We’re outta here! Let’s get some payback on the way!” The pair left their trash on the counter along with a twenty-dollar bill and walked out of a local restaurant that prefers to remain anonymous.

When I got home from Leon’s wake, Lynn still wasn’t answering my calls so I gave her phone number a rest. Sometimes it’s a good idea to let things cool off for a while. After looking out the window one last time, just in case, I got comfortable on the couch where bed linens and a scratchy laced pillowcase awaited me, finally hit the sack around 11:30. The day was full and done and I knocked out and drifted from paranoia into a cloud.

Two uniformed police officers sat in their squad near the viaduct entrance to Black Beach, under the Skyway Bridge. Though the evidence techs had finished their job a day earlier at the site of Joey Miller’s beaching, downtown had ordered the site manned until further notice. Just up the river a long Norfolk and Southern intermodal freight train made its way across the rail lift bridge, built

more than a century before. The train was headed into a yard south of Chicago's Loop, a hub for further distribution of its freight containers to other points across the country.

People of a certain gender and guys who share no interest in trains, bridges or the combination of the two may skip the next few paragraphs. Imagine ten railroad tracks crossing this point on the Calumet decades back at the height of Chicago's industrial and rail transport ages! That's why all these bridges are still standing here, though only one pair of tracks on one bridge still operates today. The two bridges just to the north of the remaining working bridge, easily recognized from their permanently raised positions, were built for the Lake Shore and Southern Railway between 1912 and 1915, from patents developed in the early 20th century by the Kansas City-based engineering firm of Waddell and Harrington. In 2006 the Chicago Landmarks Commission recommended these two, along with eight more rail bridges in the city, as designated landmarks. The towers that support the spans over the river are one hundred ninety feet tall, with each of those spans running two hundred nine feet nine inches long. They are skewed at about a fifty-degree angle.

In the space between those two and the still-working bridge once stood yet a fourth nearly identical bridge of the same double-track steel truss design, but it was dismantled by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1965. During that demolition two workers were killed and five others injured when a steel beam being lowered onto a barge on the river came loose from its crane support.

Those first two bridges, the working and dismantled bridge, were built between 1912 and 1913 for the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne & Chicago Railway. Currently the sole operating bridge is owned and maintained by the Norfolk & Southern Railway, with the familiar black engines wearing the galloping horse and stripes in white.

All that remains of the Straus heel-trunnion bascule bridge, the fifth rail span crossing the river here, are the fixed approach span and mechanical frame, after the *Pontokratis*, a vessel traveling inland on its first and last voyage up the Calumet, collided with the double-track bridge in 1988. Often referred to as the jackknife bridge, this structure boasted the longest bascule span in the world when it was completed

for the Baltimore & Ohio Chicago Terminal Railroad in 1913. Prior to its sudden destruction, the jackknife bridge served the Chicago Short Line Railroad with some regularity. USX Corporation owned it at the time of its demise, but seldom used the bridge, so moving its freight to other trackage in the area was not difficult to do.

The loud metallic noises of the train trucks and all the clackity-clack echoes on the water and under the Skyway convinced the officers to leave their windows rolled up, so in their air-conditioned homeland security-funded SUV they didn't catch the firecracker sounds or see the flashes of light just beyond the rail bridges, on the opposite bank of the waterway.

I got the call just before midnight. It was Sergeant Bill Jankowski. He had heard the address again on his police scanner. I darted to my car, still wearing my house slippers. There wasn't time to change.

When I pulled into the alleyway just to the left of the Short Line yard tracks, my building on East 95th Street where Leon died two days before was fully engulfed in flames. Looked like the neighbor's unattached garage next door was a total loss, too. One fire company was battling the blaze, with a second crew just unpacking hoses from their rig. A water tower was already set up and pumping from Avenue N, but my place was finished. The firemen wanted to be sure this inferno didn't spread to the two buildings fronting the immediate properties.

The blaze drew a bit of a crowd for midnight, including a Short Line train crew watching from their very clean diesel switcher just north of the crossing. Police kept what little street traffic there was at this hour flowing as well as they could, herding the pedestrian bystanders to the north side of 95th Street and away from the fire crew. I had to walk away from the scene, going a few lots east along 95th.

Just what a steamy summer night in Chicago needed. All that smoke made my eyes tear up.