

# *Upon Some Midnights Clear*

*by*

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BALZIC HAD HAD A DECK built on the back of his house. There had been a porch, but it was narrow, and the wood had, started to rot. The deck extended fifteen feet beyond where the porch had been, and it was made of chemically treated lumber that required only a coat of linseed oil and mineral spirits every couple of years. The frame had been bolted to the basement wall with steel rods, and the carpenters had assured Balzic that before the deck fell the wall of his basement would have to fall. The deck gave Balzic room to pace when his family was asleep and to drink wine and to talk to himself and to look at the stars. It also gave him an emotion he had never suspected he had in him: it made him feel rich.

Balzic was out on it, prowling from rail to rail in a heavy sweater and wool cap, wineglass in hand, gaping on a cloudless night at constellations he knew he'd seen all his life but could not name and telling himself that he was going to buy a book on astronomy so he could learn them, when the phone rang in the kitchen. He cursed without pause until he answered it.

“Yes.”

“Mario? Ed Sitko. You gotta come up to the hospital. Some lady got her head busted and all her money got stolen.”

“She alive?”

“Yeah she’s alive. Does she have to be dead before you check her out all her money gets robbed? Huh?”

“Why’re you callin’ me? You know who to call.”

“That’s why I’m callin’ you. ’Cause I know who to call. This is bad here, this lady, what they did to her. This is real shit. You gotta come up here, I’m tellin’ you.”

“Eddie, I’m drinkin’ wine, I’m lookin’ at the stars, I’m walkin’ around on my deck. What you’re talkin’ about sounds like a mug, you know? Call the station. Call the—”

“It is a muggin’. The lady had her whole Christmas Club get stolen. Over five hundred bucks. Except it wasn’t a Christmas Club. She just saved it. And she went and got it out of the bank today and she was on her way home and some nigger rolled her. Right on Pittsburgh Street. In broad fuckin’ daylight. I think it stinks. Old lady can’t walk around in broad daylight, I’m telling you these niggers are really askin’ for it, no shit they are—”

Balzic drained his glass and cradled the phone in the crook of his shoulder and neck and opened the refrigerator and grabbed the carafe that he filled from four-liter jugs. He poured his glass two-thirds full.

“Hey, Mario, you still there?”

“I’m still here.”

“Well whatta you gonna do? You comin’ up or what?”

“Eddie, don’t misunderstand me. Your men—all over the entire fire department—I have never heard even one word of disrespect for you

“What’s your point?”

“The point is, Eddie, if I see a fire or if one of my people sees a fire, we don’t call you personally. We call nine-one-one and we—”

“Are you comin’ up here and see this old lady or you gonna give me some speechy shit—”

“Goodbye, Eddie. “

Balzic put the phone in its cradle and took his wine out onto the deck and leaned back and looked against the Big Dipper and the North Star, the only elements in the sky he knew. He turned to his right to the south and looked at that vast flickering and sighed and sipped his wine and started to whisper that he should go to the hospital just to kick Eddie Sitko in the shins. He looked up again and said aloud, "I been alive so long I don't want to think about it and I look up at night and I can't name two things up there. That's disgusting."

He drank the rest of his glass of wine and went back into the house, wrote a note to his wife saying where he was going and left it on the kitchen table, and got his raincoat, and went out to his cruiser.

Though it was the third week of December the weather had been mild, with frequent but light rain and temperatures only once low enough for a frost. This night it was forty-five degrees and there was almost no wind. There had been sporadic drizzles in the afternoon, and the streets glimmered as the headlights from Balzic's cruiser shone on them.

He parked near the emergency entrance of Conemaugh Hospital and left his keys in the ignition. He got out and saw a bowlegged security guard hustling toward him and shaking his head from side to side.

Balzic held up his ID case so the guard could see it and then pointed with it to his car. "If you got to move that, the keys are in it. I don't know how long I'm gonna be."

"Oh I was gonna run your tail out of there 'til I seen it was you," the guard said. "Oh, there ain't no problem though. You stay all you want. I'll watch out for you."

Balzic nodded and waved and pushed through the swinging doors into the emergency waiting room.

The waiting room was empty. Not only was no one present, the only sound was coming from a TV set. Balzic looked around as he walked to the registration and information desk and wondered how it was possible that on a Friday night in the week before Christmas no one was sitting in this room.

He was almost to the first hole in the first window above the first desk of two at the registration counter before he heard voices. They were the voices of dull exhaustion, of people complaining of too much work in too little time. He rang the bell. The conversation stopped, and a short, lumpy woman with overly large glasses halfway down her nose and stiff hair piled high atop her head came around a door and asked absently if she could help him.

He held up his ID case and asked if the fire chief was around.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I haven’t seen—oh wait. I did see him. Early. About five after eleven. When I first came on. But I haven’t seen him since.”

“He just called me from up here. Maybe he’s someplace else.”

“You might try the front desk.”

Balzic turned away and then turned back. “Uh, it’s a little quiet in here. I mean, I can’t ever remember coming up here on a Friday night at one o’clock in the morning and seeing this room empty, you know?”

“Oh God this is the first time I’ve stopped since eleven. I’ve only been here a month so I don’t know what it’s like—but, uh, so you’re the chief of police. I heard a lot about you. My sister’s husband works for the street department.”

“Oh yeah? Who’s that?”

“Nicky Perrone. You know him? He just started a little while ago. Three months, I think.”

Balzic nodded. “Yeah I know him. I mean I don’t know him, I know who he is. He got hired? Full time?”

“No no no no. He’s just fillin’ in. Somebody got hurt or something. And somebody else got sick. You know how it goes.”

“Yeah. I was gonna say the budget the city’s workin’ on, I didn’t think anybody was gettin’ hired. Say, listen, you want to do me a favor? You get an old lady in here this afternoon, got knocked in the head or something? You remember anything like that?”

“Oh sure. That was Mrs. Garbin. Her husband used to work for the city. Years ago. Then he got hurt real bad on his leg. He worked for the, uh—”

“Sanitation department,” Balzic said, nodding. “I remember him. Very well. Some kid he was working with dropped a garbage can on his leg, screwed up his Achilles tendon. Yeah. He took a disability pension. Garbinerri. So that was his wife, huh?”

“Yes, isn’t that awful? Honest to God, you get robbed right in broad daylight in the middle of Pittsburgh Street. All her savings, I heard. Close to a thousand dollars. Imagine.”

“Uh, I heard it was not that much. So, uh, maybe you should not, uh, you know—”

“But imagine! Right before Christmas. That’s such a shame.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah. Well, I don’t know what the amount was, but I have an idea it was probably less, if you know what I mean.”

“Well, no matter how much it was it’s still a darn shame. These niggers—honest to God—everything they get and they don’t want to work and who pays for it? Us, that’s who. Fools, that’s what we are. They want welfare they oughta work, do something, my God.”

Balzic had heard the speech so many times since the 1960s that he believed he had developed an immunity to it, had developed a way of appearing to listen when he had tuned out after the first time he heard the word “welfare.” But this time he was dealing with something else and was compelled to interrupt the woman.

“Who said it was a nigger number one, and number two, who said this particular nigger—whoever he’s supposed to be—was on welfare?”

“Well—why that’s—I just heard it, that’s all. It’s all over the hospital.”

“Look here, Missus, uh?”

“Mrs. Sandusky. Virginia.”

“Mrs. Sandusky, these rumors—and that’s what they are—please don’t repeat them. I have enough trouble over the holidays, especially Christmas. I don’t need something else to worry about, you understand?”

“I—I guess.”

“Well, you think about it. Please. Okay? Goodnight.”

Balzic turned in time to see Eddie Sitko coming around the bend of the corridor some ten yards away.

“Christ, it’s about time,” Sitko said. “What took you so long?”

Balzic scratched his throat and walked away from the reception desk, out of Mrs. Sandusky’s hearing. “Eddie, exactly what do you expect me to do here now? Huh? Am I supposed to talk to this woman? Now? It’s almost one-thirty?”

“No—nah, Christ, you don’t have to talk to her. I did all that.”

“Oh really? And the next time some goddamn tank car springs a leak on the Conrail line I’ll just go down and take care of it myself, is that okay with you?”

“Huh? I don’t follow you.”

“I said the next time some tank car springs a leak I’ll go down and take care of it myself. You follow that?”

“Yeah, I got you now. But, oh, you’re kiddin’ me, right? I mean, that’s different.”

“Oh? How’s it different? Tell me, I want to hear how it’s different.”

“Well with chemicals you got to know what to do. And you don’t—what the fuck’re you talkin’ about?”

“Uh-huh. What I’m talkin’ about is you know how to ask this old lady what happened to her, right?”

“Hey, Mario, quit bustin’ my balls, huh? I mean I was here when she got brought in and nobody was around, so I talked to her, that’s all. I tried to call your guys two or three times, I couldn’t get no answer. So I just kept talking to her. And she told me everything. Honest.”

“Okay, so now you got me up here, and this lady can’t say anything until tomorrow anyway, so exactly what am I doin’ here?”

“What you’re doin’ here is listenin’ to me. I already checked this out with all my officers and what we decided—”

“Oh now wait a minute.”

“Just listen! Listen, I’m tellin’ you. What we decided was we’re gonna do some things and—”

“Eddie, Eddie, Jesus Christ you couldn’t tell me this over the phone?”

“Tell you what? You don’t even know what I’m gonna say.”

“Oh I know what you’re gonna say and the answer is the same one I would’ve given you over the phone. Honest to Christ, Eddie, sometimes you’re really out of line, you know it?”

“Listen, on the phone you’d’ve hung up on me—which is what you did anyway, prick. And you can’t hang up on me while I got you here, huh? Can you? Huh? Huh?”

“The answer is no,” Balzic said, turning abruptly and walking toward the door.

“What answer is no? Whatta you mean no? You didn’t even hear the question yet,” said Sitko, hustling along beside Balzic and ducking in front of him when they reached the exit.

Balzic stopped. “Get outta my way. I’m not gettin’ mixed up with another one of your goddamn campaigns. I told you that after the last one. Seven hundred and some bucks still not accounted for in that one and people are lookin’ at me funny ever since. Get outta my road, I’m tellin’ you.”

“Mario, we got to have you. And nobody’s lookin’ funny at you about nothin’. That’s a load. Nobody ever accused you of—”

“Nobody accused me! You got a couple assistant chiefs still don’t talk to me. Those fuckers think it went in my

pockets. You gonna argue with that? Or you gonna get out of my way?”

“Okay,” Sitko said. “Okay. Be that way. Go ahead. Let a couple of stupid fuckers keep you from doin’ what’s right. From what *you* know is right.”

“Aw give it a break for crissake. G’night.” Balzic stepped out of the waiting room and then leaned back in. “Just so there’s no misunderstanding here. I’m not signing anything, I’m not opening any accounts, I’m not countin’ anything, I’m not carryin’ anything, and I don’t want to hear from anybody that you said I was gonna do any of those things.”

“Man oh man, talk about a fuckin’ Scrooge.”

“Good night, Eddie.”

Sitko followed him out. “We put the arm on everybody, we can raise two grand nothin’ flat. And that ain’t even bringing the newspaper into it. Or the radio station. Throw them in, we get four thousand easy—”

“Good night, Eddie,” Balzic said, walking toward his cruiser.

“We’ll get three thousand without you—”

“So do it.”

“Four, maybe five with you.”

“Sounds like you got to find a substitute.”

“What’re you so fuckin’ hard-assed about? Jesus Christ.”

Balzic stopped and wheeled about. “Hey, you listen, I don’t care what it is. World War Two vets with no legs that’re gonna fall outta their wheelchairs or little kids that need a kidney, or whatever the fuck you got in mind. I don’t sign nothin’, count nothin’, carry no money, not one goddamn thing so some prick can say I looked like I ripped off two dimes! You hear? I been down this road twenty times with you. And now you want me to do it for some woman I haven’t even talked to yet. Where’s your brains?”

“You know what this smells like to me? It smells like an insurance job, only this lady doesn’t have any insurance, so she’s gonna get ripped off right before Christmas—”

“Oh Mario, Jesus Christ, you’re really gettin’ warped, you know that?”

“Just listen a minute. You know how many insurance burglaries I got to contend with now? You have any idea how many stolen cars we find burned? Pros just strip ’em, they don’t waste time burnin’ ’em. So who burns ’em? Kids bum ’em. Kids and guys who can’t make the payments on ’ern is who bums ’em, that’s who. And now you got a lady who lost her life savings one week before Christmas. Eddie, I’ll make you a bet. I’ll bet you a hundred bucks against a dime she doesn’t have any insurance—”

“Aw, Mario, for crissake.”

“You want to bet or not?”

“I don’t even want to think about what you just said. If you saw this woman—you know who it is? Her husband used to work for the city for—”

“Jack Garbin’s wife is who it is.”

“Holy shit. You know who it is and you keep on thinkin’ what you’re thinkin’—Christ Almighty, I don’t believe it.”

“You gonna take the bet or not? Yes or no.”

Sitko looked at the macadam of the parking lot and shook his head and whistled. “I’ll be a sonofabitch. Mario, you have been a cop too long, no shit you have.”

“You want to make the bet, you know where to find me,” Balzic said. “But no matter what, don’t you use my name in no goddamn fund-raiser, I’m tellin’ you. You want to raise money for this lady you do it without me. I’m not raisin’ a nickel for anybody I haven’t talked to.

“But you know what pisses me off? You really want to know? You could show me pictures of arson, you could tell me all about it, tell me what books to read and who to talk to, but if I didn’t see some bastard strike a match I wouldn’t fuckin’ dare tell *you* how a fire got started. But you happen to be in the hospital when somebody gets brought in with a busted head and all of a sudden you not only know what happened, you also know how much was robbed and that a nigger did it. And when I tell you it sounds like somebody’s

trying to work a number, you tell me I been a cop too long. And all I was doin' was mindin' my own business on my deck and drinkin' some wine. Man, no shit, good night."

Balzic turned to go to the cruiser and found the bowlegged security guard shrugging and working his lips as though he believed there was something he ought to be saying or a duty he ought to be performing. "It's okay," Balzic said. "We been hollering at each other for thirty years. We always holler. Forget about it."



Out of habit, Balzic drove by the station on his way home. He regretted his habit the moment he turned off the street into the parking lot because directly in front of him was the large, oblong, gleaming face of Billy Lum, bright with the excitement that came from someone else's wrong luck of having been in front of him at a wrong moment. Lum was in his early thirties, chocolate brown with a pocked complexion, with a huge growth of hair surrounding a circle of skin in the top rear of his elongated head. He had a ropey neck, heavy shoulders, muscular arms, and large scarred hands, all of which he'd gotten from years of emptying garbage cans into the backs of garbage packers owned by his father.

Lum was the oldest son of a man whose packers carried half of Rocksburg's residential garbage and most of its commercial, and whose bills were paid on time in full. Lum should have stood first in line to inherit a garbageman's empire. There was one problem: though Lum and his father worked with each other six days a week and had for years, they did not speak to each other except in the briefest way about the most necessary things. Lum dumped garbage into a packer driven by a man who had announced publicly and often that he had no intention of allowing his oldest son to become anything but a well-paid laborer. Lum, still stinging from that knowledge in a way even he only dimly

understood, took his revenge on the rest of the world; he was too afraid of his father to take it any other way.

Lum, in handcuffs, was being led up the steps into the duty room by Patrolman Larry Fischetti. Lum was laughing scornfully at Fischetti and talking loudly, defiantly, obnoxiously. He stopped abruptly at the door and squinted in Balzic's direction.

"Hey, Ballzy. Hey, mah man, hey. C'mon in. Get with the program!"

Oh shit, Balzic thought, and groaned aloud. He parked and turned off the ignition and was getting out of his cruiser when Patrolman Harry Lynch drove in. Lynch got out of his cruiser carrying two plastic evidence bags. He had almost reached the steps before he noticed Balzic and then came and bent down by Balzic's window.

"You want to know what that stupid bastard did this time?"

"To be honest with you, Harry, I don't really want to, but I know neither one of us has a choice so go 'head."

"You're gonna love this," Lynch said, shaking his head. "This redneck—I don't know where the hell he's from, West Virginia I heard somebody say, but maybe he was saying Waynesburg. Anyway, this redneck gets all boiled up and winds up in the Black Legion where he gets into an argument with guess who. And guess who just happens to be able to get his hands on a .357 magnum. And it ain't his, understand—he was just 'able to get his hands on it. Don't you just love this fucker's lies? I mean, they're such goddamn beauties and he knows you know they are, but he tells 'em anyway. Shit."

"So what happened?"

"I don't know what happened. I don't know in what order. All I know is I got a white guy in the hospital—must've had all the luck in the world, honest to Christ, it went right between his ribs right here"—Lynch pointed to his own ribs on the left side—"and didn't touch nothin'. Not one goddamn thing. Blew a gutter in him but that's all. I mean it knocked him right off his feet, and he

cut his head on a table or something when he went down, but that .357 just tore away a bunch of flesh, that's all."

"You got witnesses?"

"Oh shit we got more than we can count. That joint was packed—"

"Who will testify? That's the key phrase—will they testify?"

"Well Christ we got the shootee. And we got the shooter. With a piece. And right here in these two bags"—Lynch held them up—"we got two slugs. They're all busted out of shape, but what d'you want from a .357? They went all the whole way through that bar and stopped in the wall. And I took good measurements—and pictures too! Got my Polaroid and took a whole pile of pictures."

"That's good, Harry. I'm glad you did all that other stuff. Because you know there are no black witnesses."

"Not this time. I got plenty. I'm tellin' you."

"Harry, you know better than I do that nobody black is gonna testify against him."

"Well ... fuck 'em. We got the shootee. And that's all the witness we need."

"Just as long as he talks."

"Why wouldn't he talk?"

Balzac took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose where the frame dug into it. "What kind of question is that, Harry? Huh? Ah, never mind. Let's get in here and see what we got."

★

Balzac had reached just the first step leading up to the duty room of the station when he heard the commotion inside. There were sharp voices and shouting and scuffling.

Balzac, followed by Lynch, bounded up the steps and into the duty room and found it packed with bodies. The smell of beer and perspiration stung Balzac's nose. The sight of the large group of men, ripped and tattered, bloody and

bleeding, halted him at once. The uproar of voices instantly offended him.

He elbowed his way through the men—there were at least twenty—and got through the lifting door in the counter to see Desk Sergeant Vic Stramsky having an impossible time trying over the roar of voices to hear what patrolmen Joe Grgorich and Andy Mitosky were saying. Rookie Patrolman Ed Zigmun was having no success keeping the noise down.

The disorder brought a rise of sourish juice to the back of Balzic's throat. He reached for his ring of keys, found the key he wanted, went to the shotgun cabinet, and unlocked it. Then he found another key and opened the lock securing one of the 12-gauge riot guns to its rack. He took the gun, stepped up on a desk, pumped a shell into the chamber, and bellowed, "Shut up! Shut up goddammit!"

The voices stopped. No one moved.

"The next sonofabitch who opens his mouth without being asked is gonna explain to me why he's talkin'. And he's gonna do that with the barrel of this up his nose—is that clear?"

There was some scuffling of shoes and some breaths drawn in and let out; otherwise, there was no sound.

Balzic looked around the room. "I don't like noise. I don't like people runnin' their mouths just to see if they work. Now every one of you. You drop your pants down around your ankles and turn and face that wall away from me. Do it now! Drop 'em! Do it! And when you've done that, you put your hands behind your heads and keep 'em there!"

There was neither hesitation nor murmur of protest. As soon as Balzic stopped talking, every civilian in the room began to undo his belt and fly front and to shove his trousers down to his ankles.

Zigmun's mouth slowly opened and he stood looking bug-eyed at the civilians and then up at Balzic on the desk and back at the civilians.

“Zigmun,” Balzic said when he was satisfied the room was quiet. “Get up and watch these people. First one talks without being asked a question, you shoot him. Don’t kill him. Just take one of his hands off. You people—before you start to talk—you try to remember where your hands are.”

Balzic stepped down off the desk and then handed the riot gun up to Zigmun after he’d scrambled up on it.

“All right, Vic,” Balzic said to Desk Sergeant Stramsky, “what’s all this about?”

“Oh this is just gonna thrill you,” Stramsky said softly, shaking his head. “Right here, right in front of us, we have a group—no, two groups of American veterans. Veterans of Foreign Wars in fact.”

Balzic closed his eyes and shook his head.

“One of these groups of men, these veterans, is from old Big Two and Korea, and the other group is from—”

“Vietnam,” Balzic said under his breath.

“You got it. The fellas with the long hair and the red hankies around their heads, well, they’re all paid-up dues members, by Christ, and the ones with the short hair, they’re also all paid up, but there’s a lot more of them than the other ones—which you can see.”

“I don’t believe this,” Balzic said darkly. “So what was the beef?”

“The beef is—and this is just as near as I can figure it—the beef is who lost the Vietnam war, followed naturally by, uh, what would naturally follow.”

“Okay okay, I get the picture. Uh, if you get no problems, no wise guys, et cetera, book ’em and get ’em the hell out. They break up the VFW?”

“Not totaled from what I hear, but they put a job on it.”

“Well fuck it, that’s between them and the club. Call the duty magistrate and work something out on a fine and costs. Do whatever you have to move ’em out. I don’t want any of these guys locked in, understand? If they can’t go minimal bond, we’ll lock ’em in, but otherwise, out, okay?”

Stramsky nodded.

Balzic turned and tried to locate Harry Lynch.

Lynch was fidgeting by the third and last of the interrogation rooms. He was looking through the stack of Polaroid photos he had in hand when Balzic approached.

“We got the bastard this time,” Lynch said as Balzic neared. “We finally got him on something that’ll stick.”

Balzic grunted something unpleasantly skeptical and brushed past Lynch into the tiny room in which sat Billy Lum, grinning his best catch-me-if-you-can-but-don’t-forget-you-have-to-prove-it-motherfucker grin.

Balzic shut the door and straddled the chair opposite Lum across the small, square, cigarette-burned and coffees-stained table.

“Bal-zeek! Mah man! Wha’s happenin’, mah man?”

“What’s happenin’ with you, Billy?”

“Hey, you first, mah man. Hy y’all doin’?”

Balzic rubbed the tip of his nose. “I think I’m doin’ all right, Billy. I was doin’ a lot better a couple hours ago, but, hell, that’s the way it goes.”

“Hey, me too! No shit. I was doin’ fine couple hours ago. Then that mothafucker Lynch put these on me”—Lum held up the wrist-restraints—“and throwed my ass in the back of his car, man, and I ain’t done nothin’ yet. She-it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah really. I mean, real-ly, man. I’m up the Legion, man, mindin’ my own damn business, talkin’ trash, gettin’ some taste, boom, boom, man, two shots or firecrackers or somethin’, I don’t know what, people fallin’ down, hollerin’, carryin’ on, screamin’—shit, pus, and corruption everywhere—and the next thing I know, here come Lynch bustin’ through the door, don’t ask no mothafuckin’ question, come right straight at me, be tellin’ me put my hands behint my back and don’t say nothin’ or he goin’ open my mothafuckin’ head, man. And the next thing is I’m outside and my poor black ass is gettin’ throwed in the back seat.”

“Your ‘poor black ass’? Is that what you said?”

“Oh Bal-zeek, don’t be jivin’, man. Call my lawyer, man, and let me get on home. You know this is jive. Lynch don’t even know what’s happenin’, man. That dude been cappin’ on me for years, ack like I done somethin’ to his daddy, man, I don’t know what he got against me. Cat’s prejudice or somethin’ I swear to God.”

“Billy, let’s skip this part, okay? Let’s go to—”

“This part? Huh? Skip what? Say what?”

“Let’s skip the bullshit you give the tourists, huh? The shit you give all the dumb little white girls at the community college, huh?”

“Bal-zeek, you been listenin’ to lies about me, man. There ain’t no truth to that shit, man. I don’t be fuckin’ with no paddy broads. I’m a soul brother. I love my soul sisters—”

Balzic bent his forehead into his hand and closed his eyes. He sighed and pushed his glasses back up his nose.

“Listen,” Balzic said after a moment, “you want to tell me about this? I’m giving you an opportunity to tell me what happened first. Now you can take this opportunity or you can let me find out everything from other people. And then when a magistrate asks me whether you were cooperative, I can answer with one of two words. Yes. No. Yes he cooperated. No he didn’t cooperate.”

“Aw man, call my lawyer up, man, and don’t be puttin’ all this jive out. My man get here and I be gone in fifteen minutes and you know it, so what’s all this shit?”

“A guy’s in the hospital with a gunshot wound, Billy. What do I know? Tell me something.”

“No shit.” Lum made his eyes go as wide open as he could. “Gosh oh golly oh gee. Is God going to take him away, Mister Po-liceman?”

“Harry!” Balzic bellowed at the closed door behind him. Then he stood quickly and went to the door and opened it in time to see Lynch hustling toward him.

“What’re you doing, Harry?”

“I was checking the state police lab. We got a problem.”

“Nobody there, right?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Cause it’s Friday night and there’s never anybody there. Fuckers think they work in a bank. That’s what you’re saying, right, we can’t get a metals test?”

“Yeah. That’s the problem,” Lynch said, nodding somberly.

“Well, we just got to work around it, that’s all.”

“Oh that’d be good evidence, Mario. We’d really have the bastard.”

“Harry, we ain’t gonna get it, so forget it. Besides, it ain’t worth diddly anyway. Tell me again what you have. From the beginning.”

“Well, I got the call from Stramsky—shots fired, Black Legion, da-da, da-da. I get there, people are still comin’ out, runnin’, hollerin’, you know. I get inside, the place is real quiet except for the noise the people are makin’ tryin’ to get out. There’s some quiet talkin’. That’s all. This white guy’s on the floor by the bar, and about a foot away from Lum’s hand, his right hand, is the piece.

“Hey, there’s nobody else at the bar. He’s just standin’ there drinkin’ like nothing’s happening, this guy’s on the floor, he’s bawlin’, and he’s bleeding all over the place from his head and the side of his chest, and Lum is just standin’ there drinking beer. So I walked over to him and I got my piece out and I ask him if that piece on the bar is his, and he says no it ain’t his and what made me think it was, did it have his name on it, something smart-ass like that, and I said put your hands behind your back and he said something else smart, and so I put my piece right behind his ear and I told him do what I told him or I was gonna light the inside of his head up.”

“Then what?”

“Then he puts his hands behind him, I put my cuffs on him, I tell him to kneel down and put his forehead against the bar and keep it there. I tell Jimmy Payne call Mutual Aid, which he does, and I look at the white guy see whether there’s anything I can do for him and there wasn’t, so I went back out the car and got my Polaroid and loaded

it up and started talking—oh, wait a second, I took the guy's belt off and I was gonna put a tourniquet on him and I said Christ, that's dumb, so—I mean, where was I gonna put it, so I mean, you couldn't put no, uh, there was no way you could put pressure on any place to stop it, you know?"

Balzac nodded and rubbed his face. "Then what?"

"Then I went back and took the pictures. I took about ten or twelve, I guess, before the Mutual Aid guys got there, and then I stopped to help them out, and when they left, I put Lum in the cruiser and then I went back in and took the rest of the pictures and got the slugs outta the wall. And then I took measurements and while I was doing that I was talking to Jimmy Payne. Turns out he called it in."

"So what'd he say?"

Lynch shook his head. "Nothin'. He had his head down. He heard the shots, said they hurt his ears, he dove for the floor, didn't hear any more shots, so he got up real slow and peeked over the bar and everyone was runnin' for the door, and then he stood up and looked over the bar and saw this dude with blood all over him. And that's all he'd say. Except that he saw the gun. But he never saw anybody holding it, understand?"

Balzac nodded. "Then?"

Lynch shrugged. "Then he called here and then Stramsky called me and that's the start."

"D'you stop at the hospital? Or did you tell somebody to stop there?"

"Oh yeah. I sent Frank Lomicka up there. And I ain't heard from him. He's probably still there. That asshole's probably still in the operating room."

"Uh, what about these witnesses? You really, uh, you really actually got some black people said they'd testify and they gave you their names and addresses?"

Lynch closed his eyes and his ruddy face reddened considerably. He opened his eyes and looked at the floor. He looked up and started to speak twice, but neither time did he say a word, and his eyes closed again.

Balzic looked over his glasses. "You lost it, right?"

"Hey, listen, Mario, honest to God I'll find it. It's gotta be here. Either here or in the cruiser. I didn't look there yet, but that's where I was goin' when you called me."

"Look, Harry, forget it. I mean I hope you find your notebook, but it's not gonna make any difference about the witnesses. You understand me, right?"

No answer.

"Harry? Am I right? Huh?"

"Yeah I guess. But I really did get four witnesses, Mario."

"I'm sure you did. No doubt. But let's concentrate on other stuff, okay? First thing, get Lomicka on the phone and see what's going on up the hospital. Maybe you can give him a hand up there. But check that out first, and then we'll see where we are, okay?"

Lynch nodded. "I'll find it, Mario, I will. I always do."

"Take care of the other stuff, worry about your notebook later." Balzic put his hand on Lynch's shoulder and gently prodded him toward the counter door.

"How we coming, Vic?" Balzic called out to Sergeant Stramsky.

"We're gonna run 'em over to Aldonelli's office four at a time. He agreed on nominal bond." Stramsky approached Balzic and lowered his voice. "What happens if they don't have a dollar—we gonna lock 'em in?"

"Christ, take it outta petty cash."

"Uh, Mario, we don't have any petty cash. Don't you—"

"Oh shit I forgot. Uh, well, listen, tell Aldonelli I'm good for it. Just get 'em the hell outta here, all right?"

"Aldonelli ain't gonna go for it."

"For crissake, it's only a goddamn dollar apiece. You mean our credit's so bad we ain't good for twenty dollars? Or thirty? Jesus. Well try it anyway. Let's just see where we are, okay?"

Balzic turned and went back to the interrogation room and found Billy Lum on his feet and walking from wall to wall.

“Who told you to stand up?” Balzic snapped, shutting the door with his foot. “Sit down!”

“Don’t be hasslin’ me, Balzeek. And get my lawyer on the phone, man. I’m gettin’ tired ridin’ this shit.”

Balzic took off his wool cap and rubbed his scalp hard. He sat in the chair nearest the door and rubbed his scalp some more and then put his cap back on. “I’m gonna say this once, Lum, so pay attention—”

“Oh man, don’t be campaignin’, man, got-damn.”

“—so pay attention,” Balzic said, lowering his voice. “You put your black ass in that chair. Now. Or you ain’t gonna see your lawyer for at least twenty-three hours. You payin’ attention?”

“I be a mothafucka.”

“You’ll be what?”

“Nothin’. Man, she-it,” Lum said under his breath, sliding over to the chair and dropping slowly into it.

“Okay, Billy. Let’s try it again. What happened in the Legion?”

“I already told you.”

“Tell me again.”

Billy Lum sighed heavily, noisily. “Aw man, gimme a cigarette.”

“No.”

“Whatta you mean no? Where the fuck we at? Russia?”

“I said no.”

“Hey, man, look here. Take the money outta my pocket and go get us a pack, man.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“You smoke all your damn life, Balzic, whatchu talkin’ about?”

Balzic put his elbows on the table and rubbed his forehead. “I haven’t smoked in almost five years, Billy.”

“Balzic, you jive, man. Every time I be comin’ in here, first thing you done was give me a cigarette, man.”

“Not the last two times I brought you in—”

“Two! Two! I ain’t been in here twice in the last five years, man! And last time I was in here, goddammit, Balzic, you was smokin’ ’cause I remember, man, y’all tried to say I cut that stupid bitch Eloise Burnside.”

“We didn’t try to say it, we said it. Because it was true.”

“True, shit. You didn’t prove it. And you don’t prove it, it’s a lie! Every mothafucker know that’s right.”

“Why don’t you skip the dumb-nigger routine and talk to me like a man for once.”

“Mothafucker, call my lawyer and let me get outta this pigpen. Talk to you like a man, shit. You ain’t funny, Balzic.”

Balzic leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “You ‘mother’ me again, Lum, and I’m gonna put leg-shackles on you and I’m gonna tell Harry Lynch to go get a big towel and wet it and I’m gonna tell him to go to work on the backs of your legs. And before you open your mouth, just remember that you haven’t been booked yet. There’s no record that you’re in this building. And there won’t be until Lynch writes it up and Stramsky gets finished with that mess out there, and he won’t be finished for a while, and Lynch can’t find his notebook. And one more thing. No matter how many suits your lawyer files against us, after it’s over not one of them will change the way you feel after Lynch gets done. just one more ‘mother.’ Just one. “

Billy Lum’s eyes narrowed ever so briefly. For a split second, his fury got out of his control and it showed brilliantly in his eyes. He knew he was at Balzic’s mercy and hated it and hated Balzic and let himself slip until that hatred gleamed through. Just as quickly, he was smiling and rolling his eyes in mock horror.

“Hey, Balzic, hey, mah man. You know I just be jivin’, man. I don’t mean nothin’. Just talkin’ shit.”

“I’m not.”

“Well, shit, whatchu want to know, man?”

“I told you what I want to know. What happened in the Legion?”

“Man, it was what I said already. I’m standin’ at the bar talkin’ shit and I hear these—”

“Before you heard the noise, what happened?”

“Nothin’ happen.”

“You said you were talkin’ shit. Who were you talkin’ shit to?”

“Oh man, I don’t know. Some soft leg.”

“Which soft leg?”

“Man, I don’t remember. I was talkin’ to couple bitches—”

“Which ones? Give me some names.”

“Labell somethin’. Labell Taylor. But she went on home. She ain’t from Rocksburg anyway. I don’t know where she from.”

“Labell Taylor, huh? What’s she look like?”

“I wasn’t payin’ no attention to that. I was jus’ talkin’ trash.”

“Tall? Short? Fat? Skinny? Old? What?”

“Balzic, I never talked to the bitch before, man. I don’t remember what she look like.”

“You can’t remember anything about her—not one little thing, like whether she was short or tall? Huh?”

“That’s right. I can’t remember not one little thing.”

“Okay, you can’t remember anything about her. Who else? You said you were talking to a couple bitches. What about the other one—or two?”

“Same thing, man. Never saw ’em before. Didn’t even know their names, man. Jus’ juicin’ and talkin’ shit, man. I wasn’t tryin’ to get no leg.”

“And just like that, bang bang, and a white guy is on the floor bleedin’ all over the place.”

“That’s it.”

“Where was this white guy before you heard the noise?”

“Never saw him. Didn’t even know he was in there.”

“It’s Friday night in the Legion and a white guy’s on the floor bleedin’ and you never saw him—until after you heard the noise and you turned and saw him on the floor. Right?”

“Right on, Balzic.”

“Which way did you turn?”

“Which way did I turn? She-it, I don’t know. What difference do it make?”

“You can only turn two ways, Billy. You can turn to your left or to your right. Which way did you turn?”

“I told you I don’t know. Who cares anyway?”

“I do. Which way?”

“I don’t remember, man. Can you dig it? I don’t know.” Balzic rubbed his cheeks and then his chin. “Let’s run this one down one more time, Billy. You’re standing in the Legion, on a Friday night, talking trash to two women, when you hear some noises. Firecrackers, gunfire, you don’t know which. Next thing you know, a white guy—who you never saw before—is on the floor bleeding. Then Officer Lynch appears, finds a .357 Colt Python revolver on the bar very near your right hand, he takes you into custody, puts you in the back seat of his cruiser, and you don’t know anything about anything, is that about it?”

“Right on, Balzic. You got it.”

Balzic nodded slowly. “You’re telling big ones, Billy, and you’re forgettin’ that there’s no record of you bein’ in the building yet. Before you say anything else, I want you to think carefully about that fact. There is no record of you bein’ in this building.”

“Balzic, man, why you gotta be threatenin’ me, man? What I ever do to you, man? You ack like I done somethin’ personal to you, man. What is all this stuff about me not bein’ in the building, man? Why you wanna talk on me like that?”

“I’m talking to you like that because I want you to have all the facts before you decide not to cooperate—”

“Cooperate! Co-op-er-ate! Man, I’m tellin’ you everything I know the answer to. What else I got to do?”

“Answer everything. It’s simple. just answer everything.”

Lum dropped his chin and looked up at Balzic. “Man, I can not tell you what I do not know. My brain only hold so

much, and if what you wants to know ain't up there, then, shit, it's shame on me, but I still can't help it."

Balzac stuck his thumbnail into the center crack in his lower teeth and pried up a particle of food. "Let's try it from a different direction. What time d'you get in the Legion?"

"I was there twice. Which time you want me to talk about?"

"Any white guys get shot the first time?"

"I don't think. Uh-uh."

"Then talk about the second time."

"Okay."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well what time did you get there?"

"I don't know. Ten o'clock. 'Leven. I don't have a watch."

"Five years ago you were stopped by the state police for, uh, driving erratically, I believe. You were stoned. Blown right out of your skull. Remember?"

"Don't remember nothin' like that."

"And you had three of those Japanese quartz watches, those ones that retail for about three hundred apiece. Remember?"

"Balzac, you know ain't nobody prove I was blowin' no weed and didn't nobody prove I didn't buy them watches, man, and if you can't prove it, it's a lie."

"What'd you do with the watches?"

"What watches?"

"The ones we were just talkin' about."

"Ain't nobody proved I even had no watches, man, so I don't know anything 'bout no goddamn watches."

"Big Jimmy Payne says he saw you fire two shots to-night. And we have at least four other—"

"Big Jimmy don't be talkin' 'bout me like that. Big Jimmy talk all kinda shit, but ain't no way Big Jimmy is goin' stand up in no trial and swear on no Bible what you say. Big Jimmy too cooled out for that."

Balzic squeezed his temples with his left thumb and middle finger. “How long you gonna persist in this dumb-nigger routine?”

Billy Lum leaned back in his chair and smiled. “I only answer the way I’m aks.”

“It’s gettin’ late, Billy,” Balzic said, standing and sighing. “I’m gonna ask you once more to cooperate—”

“I answered everything you aks.” Lum drew out the last word.

“—and when the DA’s people want to know why I recommend no bond—”

“No bond!”

“That’s right, no bond, and when they ask me why—”

“C’mon, Balzic, it’s only a goddamn assault with a prohibited weapon and we both know you don’t have a case on that little legal turd, so what the hell’re you talkin’ about no bond—”

“Oh, indeed. Little legal turd, huh? Tired of Dumb Lum, huh? Maybe you’re even gonna get enough intelligence to know how long you’re gonna sit before I tell anybody you’re here. Or is that too much to ask?”

“You got no case, Balzic. You got a piece on a bar two feet away from my hands when Lynch came in. I just heard you tell Lynch you got nobody to give me a test see whether I fired a gun. And we both know nobody in the Black Legion is gonna talk on me.”

“You’re forgettin’ somebody.”

“I ain’t forgettin’ nobody.”

“The shootee, Lum. The shootee.”

Lum’s lips turned down negatively and he shook his head slowly, forcefully. “Ain’t nobody in the Black Legion gonna talk on me,” he said again. “You ain’t got no case. So why don’t you call my lawyer so I can get on home.”

Balzic crooked his finger several times at Lum. “Let’s go. You’re gonna sit in the dark for a while.”

Lum rolled his chin over to his right shoulder. “Maaan, sheeee-it...”

“Up. On your feet and movin’, I’m tired, I want to go home.”

There came a sharp rap on the door. Stramsky opened it and poked his head in. “See you for a second?”

Balzic followed him out and closed the door. “Yeah?”

“Lomicka just called. The shootee just took a walk.”

“What? How the hell is that possible?”

“Well, apparently they just had to stitch him up. Or staple him, or whatever the hell they’re doin’ now.”

“They didn’t knock him out and Lornicka didn’t ask, right?”

“Sounds that way. Lomicka’s pretty embarrassed.”

“So where’s Lynch?”

“He just got there when Lomicka was callin’.”

“So did either one of ’em—did anybody in the hospital make the guy? Nobody went through his clothes? Checked his wallet?”

Stramsky shook his head no.

“Oh Jesus. Lum just sat in there, grinnin’ at me, jerkin’ me off, tellin’ me we don’t have a case, and here we are, two cops and everybody in that hospital working on the shootee—while he’s awake and nobody has the presence of mind to ask him what his name is and where he lives. And that bastard Lum is gonna walk again.”

Balzic chewed his teeth and fumed. “I’m takin’ Lum downstairs. That sonofabitch is gonna give up some time for this. Nobody calls his lawyer until the watch changes, got that? And then I’m gonna stick it to him on the bond.”

Stramsky nodded. “Oh. Hey. We got four guys can’t put together a dollar between ’em.”

“So?”

“They want to be locked in.”

“What?”

“I’m tellin’ you. Go ask ’em yourself. Some kind of fuckin’ protest or somethin’.”

“What?” Balzic’s voice was squeaking upward. Stramsky sighed and shrugged several times. “Go ask ’em, what can I tell you?”

“Those guys over there?” Balzic jerked his thumb at four bedraggled, bloodied men in their middle to late twenties. He walked quickly toward them, shaking his head as he went.

“All right, what is this? This protest crap? What protest? What’s goin’ on?”

“That’s right,” said the shortest of the four. He had a mass of dried blood that spread from his left nostril to his left ear.

“What’s right?”

“This is a protest. Lock us up. We’re not movin’.”

“What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Everybody got to make their statement somehow, man, and this is where we make ours,” said a blond fellow with a badly swollen lip and blood caked over his jaw and down his neck.

Balzic looked **at** his shoes. “Fellas, it’s late, my patience is gone, I’m tired, I’m gettin’ crankier by the minute. I don’t think you belong here, I don’t want you here, but I’m not gonna put up with any shit either. So somebody better explain.”

The four looked at each other and then seemed to agree by a series of shrugs and lifted thumbs and pointed shoulders that the short one should make the explanation.

“Okay, This is fine with me,” he said, pulling at his nose. “Ain’t no veteran in America, in the whole goddamn America, the whole goddamn history of this country been screwed like the guys that served in Nam. And guys are writin’ their congressmen and that shit and writing letters to the papers and for what? For nothin’, that’s what. We can ‘t even go in—like us, here. We go in the VFW, every damn one of us is a member, dues paid right up to the month—and we go in there—every time we go in there some motherfucker starts some shit, man.”

“Right, yeah, goddamn right,” the others chimed in.

“And you know what it’s about, man? Huh?”

“I’m listening,” Balzic said.

“It can start out about a hundred different things, man, but when all the bullshit’s over, when they get down to it, man, these fuckin’ people look at us like we’re some kind of shit ’cause the fuckin’ U.S. lost, man. Like it was our fault. Like we weren’t tryin’ or some fuckin’ thing.”

More nods and groans of agreement.

Balzic licked his lips and held up his right index finger. “I don’t want to interrupt you, but I can see where you’re goin’. I mean, I sorta understood all that before. But my question is this: if you’re gonna have a protest—and I ain’t saying whether you should or you shouldn’t or whether you have a beef or don’t have a beef—but exactly whatta you think’s gonna be accomplished, uh, I mean, just what’re you tryin’ to, uh, no. Just who do you think is gonna be impressed by this protest if you’re gonna be locked in here? I mean who’s gonna see you? Who’s gonna listen?”

“We’re gonna have a fast, man,” said a heavysset fellow with his right eye puffed shut.

“No, no, no. Wait a second. You’re not gonna have any fast here ’cause you’re goin’ tomorrow morning. Out. In fact. Now that I think about it, out now. Go’wan. Out. Go home. I don’t want to hear nothin’. Beat it.”

“Hey, man, you can’t do that,” said one who had previously been quiet. “We caused a disturbance. We were in a fight. We broke up a club. That’s assault and battery or something. Disturbing the peace. We broke the law. You guys arrested us, we admit it, we plead guilty. That’s fair. That’s right. You got to lock us up. That’s the law. “

Balzic canted his head in the direction of the last speaker, a fair-skinned, smooth-faced fellow who looked barely nineteen. Even the several large abrasions on his cheek and jaw did nothing to age him,

“Don’t tell me the law,” Balzic said. “If I don’t arrest you or book you or sign the information against you, you ain’t even here. So do me a favor. You want to have a protest, a fast, you don’t wanna eat, then fine. You have one to your hearts’ content. Only not here. Now take a walk.”

The shortest one promptly sat on the floor. He had a little trouble doing this as his trousers were still down around his ankles. The three others immediately followed his example.

Balzic closed his eyes and sighed. “All right, all right, then if you don’t want anybody makin’ sense with you, then listen to this. I got two guys hustling people over to the magistrate, uh, two in the hospital, Zigmun there, Stramsky, and me. That’s seven. I can have all seven here in about three minutes. Four tops. I guarantee you that within a minute you will be in the parking lot, and there’s a very good chance somebody will be hurt. Maybe bad.

“Now you guys are veterans, and so am I and so is Stramsky. We feel certain, uh, what do I wanna say here? Uh—a kinship with you. We feel for you. We don’t wanna fuck with you, not for a second. Least of all not for something as dumb as that thing you’re complainin’ about, losin’ the war in Vietnam, Jesus. I don’t have a bitch with you guys. Except this—and pay attention, ’cause I’m not kiddin’.

“This is my headquarters. This is my office. This is where I work, this is where my people work. And my rule is, nobody fucks with it. Not you, not anybody. So the choice is yours, either you go or we make you go. Take your pick. Out on your own or we put you out. You got ten seconds to decide, startin’ now.”

“Aw fuck it, man. Let’s do it outside.”

“Hey. I got it. Let’s do it with our clothes off. Bare ass. Huh? Whatta you say?”

“Hey, right. Right!”

“That’ll attract some fuckin’ news media, huh? Attract them eyewitness news motherfuckers, them channel-eleven-we’re-the-ones-to-watch motherfuckers—”

“Right! Those action-news-puts-you-there motherfuckers.”

Balzic put up his hands and glared at the four of them until their exuberance subsided. “I wouldn’t do that. I mean, you do what you want. But two things. Hear? Two

things. Number one, that's indecent exposure and then we're right back where we started. Two, it's supposed to get very cold tomorrow, like, I heard, maybe five or six degrees. And I'm just prick enough to not arrest you until morning. So you guys give it some thought. In the meantime, out!"

Balzic started toward the door, but had taken only the first step when the spokesman lunged off the floor and swung at Balzic. The blow caught him flush on the side of the neck and sent him reeling sideways against the desk. By the time he righted himself and turned around, Stramsky and Zigmun had pinned the spokesman against the wall. Stranisky had his right forearm across the spokesman's throat, had the spokesman's right arm stretched against the wall, and had the heel of his right shoe dug into the spokesman's right instep. Zigmun had the other arm and was standing on the other instep.

"More you twitch," Stramsky said, "worse it's gonna feel. It's up to you. "

Balzic picked up the calendar and stapler that had gone flying when he banged onto the desk. Holding his neck, he said to the three other vets, "Get your pants up and get out and I don't mean five minutes from now. Don't even think about arguin'. Don't even think. just do it."

The vets scrambled to their feet, hitching and tugging up their pants, their eyes darting from Balzic to the vet pinned against the wall to Stramsky and Zigmun and back to Balzic. Without a word, they shuffled and slouched toward the door and then out.

Balzic watched them go. When they were outside, he turned to the vet Stramsky and Zigmun were holding.

"Let him go." Balzic waited until they released him and until he coughed and hacked and gasped for air and achieved a semblance of normal breathing.

"So," Balzic said. "So you can't stand freedom, huh? So you wanna punch your way into prison, right?"

"What're you talkin' about?"

“Oh you know what I’m talkin’ about. You know positively, perfectly well what I’m talkin’ about, “ Balzic said, moving toward the vet until he was less than a hand’s width away from him. “You got a name, tough guy?”

“Murlovsky.

“Well, Mis-ter Murlovsky. So you wanna go to jail, huh? You wanna get inside, huh? You wanna get in there and tell the other tough guys how you don’t take shit from nobody, huh, least of all from cops, is that it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Course you don’t. You think you wanna be a real man among real men, don’t ya? You think you wanna tell outlaws about what a real rebel outlaw you are, don’t ya, huh? Well, you’ll do that no matter what I say now, or what anybody says now or ever, but I’m gonna tell you about guys who punch cops in police stations. You listenin’, huh?”

“I’m listenin’.

‘Good. Then try this on for size. You think you’re a man? Huh? Shit, you’re not even a baby. You think you wanna go to prison, huh? Bullshit. You wanna go where you don’t have to make a decision about what you do next. You know what a cell is for guys like you? It’s a womb. It’s a place where you get fed and you get clothed and housed and you don’t have to do a fuckin’ thing except breathe. Some guys break out of prisons. Guys like you break in. For guys like you, a cell’s your biggest escape. So you go inside, and you brag to all the other assholes about how bad you are, how tough you are, but I just told you what a candy-ass you really are. And now you can’t even use the excuse that you don’t know what you did.”

Balzic turned to Stramsky. “Put him in with Lum. Give him something to remember.”

