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In The Life

“Hector is on his way up here. He wants to speak to you.”

“Now?” Gold asked. To hear above the din of traffic, he pressed the cell against his ear.

“Yes! Fucking Now!”

“I’m on my way to work,” Gold told Byron. He waited with the other suits for the light on the corner of Madison and 73rd Street. It was a perfect spring morning.

“Dave do not make this guy look for you.” Byron hung up.

Gold was sure that Byron was overreacting and that he, Gold, would be able to straighten this situation out with Hector. It was not going to be a problem going into work late. Gold had no cases to cover. He was working night court. They would not even notice that he was not there. Things were going to be worked out, as they always were, Gold reassured himself.

At Eighty Sixth Street Gold caught the uptown number Four Express. The car was crowded with high school girls in tight jeans who brushed against him with their knapsacks and screamed at each other above the train’s noise. One heavy set teenager used the belt loops of her jeans to pull them up over her substantial hips.

Down the stairs at 149th Street and Grand Concourse, Gold caught the uptown number two through the South Bronx and out to the daylight of the EL and the Pelham Parkway stop.

Gold took the steps to the street. Above, the sun filtered through the tracks and cast shadows onto the black top below. It triggered within Gold images of his childhood as he walked down this block.

The Cuchifrito took the place of Sid’s Kosher deli. Empanadas instead of knishes and franks were on the grill in the front window. A Dominican Hair Stylist specialized in fades, braids, cornrows and hair extensions. A Pakistani in the newsstand replaced the blind guy with the scary eyes and the Yamulkah that Gold remembered. Tony’s Pizzeria

and his parents' butcher shop, were up ahead on the corner of Lydig. The sign says 'Gold's Kosher Butcher'. Pork chops and pigs feet filled the display.

"Esther, look who came to visit." Nathan, his father told her.

She did not hear above the meat grinder that dripped chop meat onto red paper.

Nathan reached over the counter to grab his son's hand. He led Gold gently around the edge of the counter and hugged him awkwardly.

Nathan was thin and strong. Like a rock. It was from all those years of carrying, cutting, chopping and sawing slabs of beef. From a lifetime of busting his ass and working like a dog, Gold thought to himself.

"I don't want to stain your suit," Nathan pulled away and gestured to the bloodstains on his apron.

Esther cleaned her hands on her apron as she approached. Her glasses were perched on the edge of her nose with a string that held them around her neck. Her features were flushed from bending over the meat grinder. She grabbed his face, and brought it down toward her lips and planted a kiss on his forehead.

"How is Penny?"

"Good." Gold answered. Good question Gold thought to himself. Gold did not know how his wife was doing because although they did live in the same apartment, they rarely talked or had much to do with one another. Lately, Penny had been coming home late from work or not coming home at all and instead stayed with her parents in Forest Hills. His marriage was not looking good.

"Come, I'll make you a hamburger. We have fresh rolls from the Puerto Rican bakery." There was a stove in the back room of the store.

"I can't Ma. I need to borrow the car. I have a meeting in City Island."

Nathan fished in his pocket for the keys.

His parents spoke with thick German accents. Nathan and Esther were from the Black Forest. They never spoke German. They were survivors of the Nazi death camps. They mumbled to each other in Yiddish, just as they were doing now, especially when they did not want Gold to understand them.

It was only when others mentioned their accent that he was aware of it.

Nathan handed the keys to his son, and a beefy man entered and looked at the London broil. Nathan waited on him and with a long shiny knife trimmed the fat off it for him.

"Are you sure you don't want something to eat?" Esther asked her son.

“Nothing Ma,” Gold was impatient. “I have to get going.”

“Bye Dad,” he called to Nathan, who was chit chatting with the customer. “Bring Penny next time,” His mother told him as she walked him to the door.

“I will,” Gold lied to her. “I’ll talk to her tonight. If it’s nice this weekend, maybe we’ll go the zoo and then stop by for a visit.” Gold did not know why he said this to Esther. None of it was true.

As Gold left the store, he heard the man who was buying the London broil ask his father: “Is that your son?”

It was parked on the far corner, where Lydig intersected with Barnes Avenue, a baby blue ’78 Pontiac Bonneville with the front end that was shaped like a nose. The broken rear brake light was repaired with red masking tape, and the bumper was reattached with wire. ‘It only has 65,000 miles on it’ was what Nathan told him when Gold bothered him to buy a new car. His parents used the car to drive the two blocks from the apartment on Pelham Parkway to the store and back. In high school Gold took the car on dates. It had a huge back seat. With its muffler rotted through, the V8 roared and the radio’s volume was turned high and tuned to 1010 ‘all news all the time’. Gold shut it off.

Gold followed Pelham Parkway East. It was a flat two lane expanse bordered by benches and paths. At the light Gold watched an eastern European lady in a long skirt and a polka dot kerchief wrapped around her head as she picked dandelions on the grass island. Nearby, a man in a black suit lounged in the sun on the rock outcroppings.

Gold crossed the bridge onto City Island Avenue. It was weekday dead. The seafood joints waited for the weekend and the crowds that inched along in traffic on the two-lane road. Gold parked the car in front of Z’s bar at the end of the island. Sea gulls hovered over the parking lot and the empty tables of the outdoor fried fish place next door.

Byron was behind the bar washing glasses. With his head, he gestured to the tables. Hector sat with his back to the window. Gold approached. The ceiling was covered with fishing nets. Gold could see that Hector was fidgeting with something in his right hand. Stuffed fish decorate the walls.

“Sit,” Hector told him.

Now Gold could see that Hector has a box cutter in his right hand and with his thumb Hector is playing peek-a-boo with the triangle shaped razor. Gold thought of what he would do if Hector swung the box cutter at him. Would he be able to protect himself and block it, or would he have one of those phone scars across his cheek that fellows in prison get for taking too long on the phone? He pushed the seat back to give himself as much room as possible just in case Hector lunged.

“Byron thinks I’m in the banking business. He is wrong. I am into making money, not lending it. Besides, the banks are a bunch of pussies who when they run out of money go crying to the government for a handout. Not me. I don’t need no fucking bailout, and I don’t believe in credit.” Hector wore rubber bands around his grey scraggly beard. A ponytail hung from the back of his baldhead. With his bulging blue eyes, Hector looked like Captain Lou Albano. He had a tear drop under the corner of his left eye. “Let me put it to you this way, if you go to the store to buy a loaf of bread, do you need money?”

Gold was not sure if the question is rhetorical or if Hector wanted him to answer. Gold decided the wise thing to do was to not say anything. Hector paused, and he continued to play with the box cutter. Through the window behind where Hector sat, naked sailboats floated on moorings. The pylon remains of a dock looked like missing limbs exposed in the low tide of the Sound. Gold thought about the video that Lou Albano did with Cyndi Lauper back in the 1980s. Why is he thinking about that now? He asked himself and then he remembered the song was ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’.

“I can see that you’re not a bad guy, but you’ve got yourself into heap of shit son. You owe me some serious cabbage. I mean I could cut your face or you could do me a solid. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think you like the way your face looks and you would rather do me a favor and work this off.” Hector slid a thick white envelope filled with cash across the table. “Fourth floor DA’s office, two o’clock. He is a young cop named Tom Donolly. You will see him in the waiting area wearing a Florida Marlins cap. Follow him to the bathroom. Put this by the toilet and take the envelope he leaves and bring it back to me.”

Hector stood. He put the box cutter in his pocket, grabbed Gold’s hand, and shook it and then he patted him on the shoulder. “You have nothing to worry about as long as you do what I want and then we’ll square this shit up. When you come back with the envelope Donolly gives you, I also want you to bring me five hundred beans for good measure. You know what I’m saying, as part of the reimbursement.”

Hector walked Gold through the bar. Byron did not look up at them.

Gold stepped out of Z’s and rushed to his car. In the car, he passed a boat yard with yachts on cradles and dinghies on top of each other pressed against the fence. There were yellow rusted hoists alongside the empty dock.

Coop City loomed over the marsh. Out of a science fiction movie, it was an alien city from another galaxy lowered from a passing space ship onto the swamp that overlooked the Long Island Sound. Gold pulled the envelope

Hector gave him out of his pocket. It was thick with hundreds. “What the fuck have I gotten myself into?” He asked himself.

Each time that Gold rode the elevator in the Courthouse he was sure that he was going to get stuck. Today was no different. The doors slammed violently behind him. Between floors, the car inched so slowly that Gold was not sure if it had moved. Finally, when they had reached the floor for the District Attorney’s Office it stalled, and the doors remained closed for a minute or so until they opened slowly.

In the large waiting area, cops and complainants waited for ADAs.

Gold spotted Donolly in the Marlins’ cap. “How are you doing?”

“Are you from City Island?” Donolly asked Gold.

“Yeah, I am Hector’s friend. Don’t tell me you’re a Marlins fan?”

”Are you kidding me? Go Yankees. I just dig the lid.”

Gold followed him to the men’s room.

“Do you believe that New Yankee Stadium?”

“What the fuck?”

At the sink, someone washed their hands.

“\$2500 box seats.”

“For what? Who’s going to be able to afford that?”

“Other than the corporate assholes.”

Finally, the guy at the sink left.

Gold used the urinal and left the envelope filled with cash by the flusher. Donolly took Gold’s spot. Instead of unzipping his pants, Donolly reached into his waistband and took out a manila envelope and placed it on top of the urinal. He took the envelope Gold had left.

Gold stuffed Donolly’s manila envelope into the breast pocket of his suit jacket.

When he came out of the rest room, Donolly was gone. Gold caught the elevator to the second floor where the courtrooms were located. The hallway was packed. In front of the huge courtroom used for arraignments, Simpstein, a rabbi/lawyer from Monsey, argued with a bunch of Dominicans in Spanish.

Zupone, an old timer, sat in the front row. He had a nervous twitch: it was as if Zupone's shirt collar was too tight so that he twisted his head to the left, again and again, as if to loosen it.

The cops must have raided the hooker spots on Hunts Point. The pimps used Zupone to get their girls out. Zupone waited for the girls to get processed through Central Booking, and then they pled guilty to loitering for the purpose of prostitution and received a sentence of time served.

Night court started at four. Gold was early. There was a lull in the courtroom. It was that time of day when day court was winding down and night court had not started.

The desk for Legal Aid was empty. In the bin, one folder remained from day court.

Tonight it was Gold working with Tofer and Bolinsky. Tofer was a fresh faced kid just hired out of Boston University Law School. Tofer, like all new Legal Aid lawyers, thought he was going to change the world, but because he was new, he was only allowed to handle misdemeanors. Bolinsky, on the other hand, had been with Legal Aid for thirty years. He was an expert on keeping his case load low. From the bin, Bolinsky had a reputation of cherry picking the paper felonies. Those were the cases that were going to be reduced to misdemeanors and pled out. All the Legal Aid lawyers knew about Bolinsky's reputation and no one wanted to work arraignments with him. Gold did not care. Any case that Bolinsky had where a client wanted to go to trial, Bolinsky would pick a fight with the client so that the client asked the judge to assign another lawyer and Bolinsky got off the case. Bolinsky had not done a trial in at least ten years.

Gold unhooked the clip on the chain separating the well from the audience section.

"Hey Gold. You working today?" Bobby the Bridgeman asked him. The Bridge was the part of the well-the front of the courtroom between where the attorneys stood and the judge sat. That was Bobby's territory. He ran the show. "Do me a favor there is a kid in the back charged with jumping a turnstile-a fare beat. He's Zooey, but Corrections doesn't want to have to take him back to Riker's Psych ward. Go in the back and talk to him. Explain to him that if he just pleads guilty, the Judge is going to release him; and if he starts acting bat shit, the Judge is going to order a 730 psych exam and remand him for 30 days. He has been here all day." Bobby placed his arm around Gold's shoulder. "They want this guy out of here. He's stinking the place to shit and the C.O.s can't take it"

"Sure Bobby," Gold told him, and he took the folder from the bin and rang the bell before the large steel door to the pens. He could hear the keys, and the correction officer opened the door from the inside.

The pens always smelled like wet rags. "He's in the 'why me cell,'" The correction officer told Gold.

Gold followed him to a smaller cell around the corner from the regular pen. It was for the inmates that had problems. Gold smelled the stench above the incense lit by the C.O.s.

Gold stood by the bars. "I'm the Legal Aid assigned to represent you. My name is Gold."

He was a short stocky white kid, and he wore woolen hats over dread locks that were matted like beaver tails.

"Don't trick me," the kid eyed Gold suspiciously.

"I'm not going to trick you. I just want to help you get out of jail."

"You're with the others. You're sending brain waves to control me." He pulled the woolen hat over his ears.

Gold felt sorry for him. Gold's eyes were nearly tearing from the smell. Maybe they should send him to the psych ward at Rikers? Maybe that's what he needs? Gold thought to himself and looked at the folder in his hand.

"My dreadlocks are a source of strength, like Samson's hair was to him." He wore layers of clothing. A jacket pulled over another jacket, Sweaters over sweatshirts. Two pairs of pants. The padding gave him the appearance of even more bulk.

"If you don't listen to me Terrance and do what I tell you to do, the Judge is going to send you to the psych ward at Rikers for a 730 evaluation and they're going to cut off your dreads."

That got his attention.

"Oh my god," His eyes welled up with tears. He was like a little kid that was about to be sent for a timeout.

"Don't get upset. I am going to help you get out of this. When we get out there the Judge is going to ask you if you plead guilty to jumping a turnstile and you say 'yes'. That is all you have to do. Got it?"

In the courtroom the judge was tired. He was doing a double. He had worked day court and now he would be working night. He looked at Gold and his client. The stench from the client reached the bench, and the judge reared back. "Does your client plead guilty to the charge of theft of services?"

"Yes Judge," Gold told him.

"Mr. Terrence Mallon, do you plead guilty to the crime of jumping a turnstile?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

"Shhh!" Gold told him. "One yes is enough."

"Time served," The Judge was hunched over his papers at the bench.

The cuffs were taken off, and Terrance skipped down the aisle of the courtroom, all the while he was whispering ‘yes, yes, yes.’”

The arraignment part was a constant stream of bodies through the system. Drug addicts were pinched for selling so they could get high. One junkie claimed it was soap, fake crack, he was selling. Another perp swore that he was taking a piss in the park and that was where he’d found the loaded gun. He said he was on his way to the precinct to turn the gun in when the police arrested him.

A woman in sunglasses beckoned Gold from the audience.

“Do you have my husband Louis Petralia?”

“Yes.”

“I am his wife. I don’t want to press charges.”

Behind the glasses, Gold could see her eyes were black and blue. They brought him out. “The complaining witness is here, and she doesn’t want to go forward.” Gold told the Judge and the ADA.

The woman in the sunglasses stood for the Judge to see her.

“What is she, a glutton for punishment? \$2500 bail. Officers take charge” The Judge said.

“I love you,” The man shouted as they took him back to the pens.

“But why?” The woman in the sunglasses wanted to know.

“For your own good.” The Judge told her. “He beats her up and now she wants to take him with her. Maybe next time he’ll kill her. Not on my watch.”

Then Gold had a case with neighbors fighting that led to each of them being charged with assault charge, and the next case was an arrest for a robbery that ended with a shooting. Some stayed in jail on bail and others were released on their own recognizance.

Gold knew that the harder he worked the faster the night went.

It was two o’clock in the morning, and Gold entered the pens to interview the last case of the night. It was the one remaining file in the Legal Aid bin. Tofer and Bolinsky had left.

A teenager waited for Gold at the interview table. “Are you the Legal Aid?”

“That’s me,” Gold told him.

“I didn’t do anything. I just caught a lift from my friend and the cops came up on us. I swear I didn’t know the car was stolen.” He sniffled.

Gold glanced at the file. His name was Edwin Garcia. He was in the eleventh grade in Evander Childs High School.

“Don’t worry Edwin. The Judge is most probably going to release you.”

“My parents are supposed to be here. Can you check for me?”

In the courtroom, Gold asked: “Is anyone here for Edwin Garcia?”

A couple in the back of the courtroom approached. They talked into the hallway.

“Is the Judge going to release him?” Edwin Sr. asked. “He’s not a bad kid and we are nice hardworking people. I work for the MTA and my wife works at Jacobi.

“We don’t want them sending him to Rikers,” The wife added. Edwin Jr. looked like his mother.

“I’m not the Judge and I can’t guarantee anything but. . . ”

“How much would the bail be?” Edwin Sr. interrupted him.

“What if we paid you? Could you make sure that he would get out tonight?”

Gold had been offered money many times before, but this time it was different because there was Hector with his tear drop and his box cutter who waited and expected Gold to bring five hundred beans tomorrow.

The hall was empty. Gold tried to be as inconspicuous as possible when he stuffed the money into his jacket pocket. “I’ll get him out.”

The court officer brought the kid out into the courtroom.

“Defendant was a passenger in a stolen car.” The young ADA told the Judge.

“Judge I’m asking that he be released in his own recognizance. He has no record, and his parents are here.”

Gold said to the Judge.

“He is released to the custody of his parents,” The Judge agreed.

The parents hugged him. Edwin Sr. looked back at Gold with a strange look. Gold did not like it. He should not have taken that money, he thought to himself.

“The court stands in recess.”

After six o'clock in the evening, there were no restrictions about parking next to the courthouse. Everybody who worked night court parked as close as they could to the courthouse. Nobody wanted to walk too far to their car in that late hour for fear of getting robbed or assaulted or worse. Gold rushed to the Bonneville parked right in front of the Courthouse.

To keep awake, he opened the window on the Major Deegan South, and exited at the Willis Avenue Bridge and then drove downtown on Second Avenue.

“Fuck, fuck,” Gold muttered to himself as he looked for a parking spot and took the side streets west across Lexington and Madison and then north again and east back across to Third, Second and York. Finally, he found one on East End by the river.

The apartment was empty. Penny was probably at her parents' house again. Gold was too tired to hang up his suit. He left it in a pile by the bed.