
NEIGHBORHOOD
BOYS
WHO *RAN*
A NOVEL

JACK
ROSENBLATT

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WHO *RAN*

New York City 2000

ONE

I'd been reading *Low Life, Lures and Snares of Old New York* by Luc Sante and was on the corner of Worth and Baxter, trying to visualize the infamous Old Brewery in Five Points and getting nowhere—it had been torn down in 1852—when my cell rang, Billy McGonigle saying, “Do you need work, Jack?”

A no-brainer, on that hot June Monday.

The week before I'd testified at a cop's trial—a very bad cop—and for my good citizenry had been photographed and placed on page three of the *New York Post* under a headline reading “*DIRTY COP TAKES FIFTH*,” which along with the hundred cold stares and pointed fingers it bought me, had done little to drum up business. So when Billy called I was ready—maybe too ready—which I never liked being with Billy—but it wasn't the first time I'd broken it, a pretty good rule in the detective business.

Never work for friends.

But who was I kidding?

“Just get up here,” Billy said.

A half-hour later I got off the ① train at Sixty-sixth Street and Broadway, nodded at Lincoln Center, the Juilliard School of Music and some pigeons, walked the three blocks up Columbus, turned right, rode an elevator and pushed it—thick frosted glass framed by deeply stained oak, with the words, *William McGonigle & Associates, Attorneys at Law* dead center of it—and went in.

Up to my ears in it, just being there.

Virgins need not apply.

There was only one attorney present, ever was—William McGonigle himself—along with Angeline—his secretary, two computers, a fax, a printer, a box of legal software, a subscription to Lexis, and occasionally—though not today—temps pushing paper. No muss, no fuss. Maybe there were associates being groomed, waiting in the wings, but I doubted it. Not Billy. He'd made a big score suing the very greedy officers of a company named Worthing Industries a year ago and had put some of it in the office: mahogany, oak, teak, indirect lighting, Tabriz rugs, oil paintings, brass, crystal, infusing the smell of class. And just four blocks from the opera.

The wages of Worthing, I'd said.

Angeline was there, up to her eyeballs in paperwork, holding the phone. She was in her late thirties, a dark-eyed, raven-haired French-Canadian beauty who always wore her skirts a little too short and her fingernails a little too long and I loved her for it. I blew her a kiss, she smiled, blew one back. She nodded me to the inner office. Already in the room were an eighty-year-old dowager in a large red hat, flashing a lemon-sized diamond; a skinny hawk-faced man in a black jacket; and a large thick-necked, ruddy-faced guy in a well-cut gray suit, carnation in lapel, named Tommy Cummiskey. Tommy Cummiskey was freelance muscle from Greenwich Village who I'd run into a few times over the years, and better than average muscle. I wondered what the carnation was for and why he was there. He looked up and grinned. I grinned back.

I passed them all and opened another door, this one solid oak, with gold letters, no plurals—*William McGonigle, Attorney at Law*—and went in.

"Jack, you bastard, I thought I'd never see you again," Billy grinning, in his booming courtroom voice.

He was wired like he often was, like a fighter before the main event.

"I've been out of the country."

"The Bronx, I hear."

He nodded knowingly as he paced behind his desk, sharp blue eyes full of energy, mind racing. He was about five foot ten, wiry, with

a full head of beautifully blow-dried red hair, matching red moustache. He was wearing navy blue pinstripes from Dunhill's, white shirt, red pin-dot silk tie, gold cufflinks—everything being Dunhill's since Worthing. I was countering with Adidas Gazelles, black jeans, beige 1936 Giants t-shirt (from Cooperstown), and chrome Timex. I was wondering why he'd called me: we'd had mixed results with the client-detective duet in the past. Almost scary. But I was a devil he knew, he'd say, who needed work. And now winked at me, an aggressive cheerfulness, still pacing.

"And to what do we owe your present impecuniousness?" Billy barked, like a schoolmaster out of Dickens.

"Overexposure in the tabloid press," I said, "and dandruff."

"Not smart tackling him, Jack." Billy saying it.

Which was true, I never should have tackled Dave Meggett, New York Giants, pre-season scrimmage in '90, a "walk-on" for Parcells...and who asked him?

Smart would have been shoving it in the dead dream file, *kicking in the NFL*, after the bar burned down—the *Devil's Due*—which I owned a piece of, in '89. Shut up, Jack, move on. Never kicking it at all...

...a fifty yards plus beauty, near the sideline and good hang time...punters dream of them...but I had...

Little Dave waiting...

I was last man and took him open field...it's called the Anterior Cruciate Ligament, punter, the trainer said, it's totaled...

Parcells later saying, "Tough, kid," referring either to my luck or stubborn character, I never knew. And I was no kid.

Six months later when I was walking okay and my brother, just retired from the cops, called me, I said, "Yes." He'd just hung out his shingle—*Dooney Investigations*. A year later he moved to Florida but I stayed north, hard-core New Yorker. Business was good that year. I was *Dooney Investigations*. A decade later, still was.

All of which was Billy's way of saying, guess what, Jack—you keep those blindfolds on when gawking in the mirror, shit happens out

TWO

“Why are all Chinese menus the same?”

“Take Hot and Sour, good for you, Jack.”

I was in Uncle Lee’s, on West Sixty-first Street, forty-five minutes later, staring at Uncle Lee. It was lunchtime—tables packed—and I needed protein.

“Hot and Sour’s too hot,” I explained.

“No, Jack—good!”

Entrepreneur that he was, Uncle Lee answered all questions with menu advice, but on this particular humid ninety-one degree Monday, I didn’t like the advice nor understand it.

“Hot and Sour, good for you, Jack.”

Uncle Lee grinned inscrutably, Buddha in a sharkskin suit. I ignored his Hot and Sour, then ordered Chicken with Orange Flavor, Hunan Pork, Ten Ingredients *Mai Fun* and a bottle of *Tsingtao*. Ten minutes later I paid him, got my brown paper bag and cabled it home, which is a one-bedroom apartment on Ninety-eighth and Amsterdam, over a Korean deli and a Cuban travel agent. There, wolfing down my lunch and sipping the last of my *Tsingtao*, I opened Billy’s large manila envelope and found a sheet of beige bond paper—typed instructions—and then a smaller, sealed security envelope, filled with what felt like cash. I began reading. I was to go to a law firm on Park Avenue, sharply dressed and pressed, and present myself to one Robert Houtanian, attorney-at-law.

I would make real estate small talk if needed.

I could proof him if I wanted to.

There was another copy of the same photo I’d seen in Billy’s office now in my hand. I stared at it.

A bit of an asshole, Billy had said.

Maybe twenty-eight, twenty-nine, an unlined, humorless, swarthy face, hint of greed around the eyes. Billy was probably right.

I tore open the security envelope and obeyed one of Dooney's primary laws—ALWAYS KNOW WHAT YOU ARE CARRYING.

I counted them—300 one-hundred dollar bills—thirty grand in all, then got a fresh envelope out of my desk, put the cash back in, sealed it.

When Houtanian gave me his envelope—photos and papers within—I would call Billy. I would dutifully wait for orders. I wouldn't curse, spit or make a ripple.

I would be the best mindless fucking zombie in North America.

I got out my Smith & Wesson, cleaned and oiled it.

And ignored the bells.

And Billy knew I would.

An hour later I stood in a waiting room three stories above Park Avenue, staring at a group of large brass letters which read: *PARK AVENUE LAW ASSOCIATES*. Where was the imagination?

It was a pleasant enough waiting room for a lawyer's office—bright, pastel colors, wood, a surprisingly eccentric collection of magazines: *The New Republic*, *Fortune*, *Guns & Ammo*, *The New York Law Journal*, *Rap World*, *Hustler*, *Catholic New York*. I wasn't sure if it was a large practice with dozens of partners, or a huge shared office affair; but there was certainly a long list of names on the wall. I didn't see Houtanian's. There were a pair of large windows looking out on the skyline, plenty of sunshine, and a bright Berber rug on the floor. At opposite ends of the Berber were a pair of deep rust-colored easy chairs, and between them, a plush gray sofa. Over the sofa was an oil painting of FDR, and nearby hung JFK and LBJ. The only non-alphabetical portrait hanging was Al Smith, also a Democrat, who was over a radiator, looking in desperate need of a beer. If Sam Adams were here, I thought, I'd introduce him to Al.