2012

Gate City

Andrew Hilleman

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GATE CITY

By

Andrew Hilleman

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2012
SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Andrew Hilleman is recommended for approval by the student’s thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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NAME: Andrew Hilleman

DATE OF BIRTH: July 14, 1982
This novel is a work of historical fiction that takes place between the years 1892 and 1934 in Omaha, Nebraska, and centers around Tom Dennison, a political boss who ran the city during this period. His exploits included rigging mayoral elections, prostitution, racketeering, bootlegging liquor during prohibition, running illegal gambling halls, and murder. Though he never held public office, he was the most influential man in Omaha politics for the first three decades of the twentieth century. Many of the policies Omaha’s current political system are in place today because of him. Arriving in Omaha from Colorado in 1892, Dennison discovers a wide open town and, with newspaper tycoon Edward Rosewater and cowboy mayor James Dahlman at his side, his control of city hall is so absolute that no crime is committed without his blessing and police report to his office for their daily marching orders. Despite his power, Dennison’s reign over the city is continually contested by civic reformers, ousted Republicans, and federal investigators who attempt to destroy his machine at every turn. From Colorado gambler to Omaha gangster, from political kingmaker to fallen criminal icon, the story of Tom Dennison is largely forgotten. This novel brings to life of one of the most villainous figures and transformative cities from America’s golden age of crime and formative years of contemporary politics.
DEDICATION

For my parents and for April
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Jennifer Howard for all her wisdom and dedication to this project. Her guidance and careful reading were instrumental in the development and success of this novel. Additionally, I’d like to thank Elizabeth Rosner, Kate Hanson, and Russ Prather for their helpful suggestions and encouragement. I’d also like to thank Raymond Ventre and Laura Soldner of the English Department for their support during my time here at Northern Michigan University. Finally, my endless thanks go out to my loving wife, April, and all of my friends and family.
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INTRODUCTION

The Conception

I began writing *Gate City* in the summer of 2010. More specifically, I began writing the prologue at three in the morning on July 17, 2010. I remember this very specific date and time because a few hours later my fiancée and I left Marquette and drove thirteen hours south to our hometown of Omaha, Nebraska, for our wedding at the end of the week. I had lived in Omaha all my life until moving to Marquette for graduate school and it wasn’t until I was finally removed from the city that I finally considered writing a story that took place there. Strangely enough, on the very day I sat down and composed the first sentence I was already heading back to the city, albeit for a short while.

When I first started the M.F.A. program, I was working on a different novel entirely. That first book was about the real-life events of a mass shooting that took place at Westroads Mall in Omaha, Nebraska, on December 5, 2007. Nineteen-year old Robert Hawkins walked into the Von Maur department store with an AKM semi-automatic rifle, took the elevator to the third floor, and opened fire on random Christmas shoppers from the top of the atrium. All total, in six minutes, he fired over sixty bullets, killed eight people, wounded three more, and then took his own life. I was a bartender at TGIFridays at the time while finishing my MA degree from Creighton University. The restaurant was just two stores away from Von Maur. I knew three of the people who were murdered. My grandparents went to the same church as the gunman’s
parents. Also, I was one of the first employees who came back into the mall three days after the shootings to begin the clean-up of the restaurant. Food was still on the cold grill, melted drinks were still scattered on the tabletops, and checks were left unpaid as everyone in the mall had been rushed out of the building by the SWAT team soon after the shooting was called into 911.

I was convinced I had to write this story. I possessed a lot of inside routes to information most people did not. However, even though I changed the names and certain details of that horrific event, the fictionalization of something so devastating to so many people seemed predatory and even immoral. So I decided I was going to write the book as a piece of narrative nonfiction in the same vain as “In Cold Blood”. Yet there were certain pieces of information I could not collect. Robert’s father refused to give interviews to anyone--not even to The New York Times. When I called him and told him who I was, he promptly hung up on me. His mother refused to speak to me as well. I don’t blame them, of course. But I was stuck. So, after nearly a year of work, I gave up writing the story because there was no way I could compose it without defiling or sensationalizing it. I was back to the drawing board.

Still, being from Omaha, I knew I wanted to write a book that took place in my hometown. However, I didn’t want to just create a story from pure imagination and simply have the city be my setting. I wanted to write a novel about Omaha, not just one that took place there. So I began to do some research, panning for ideas. What I discovered captivated me even more than the Robert Hawkins story. The man was Tom Dennison, a political boss who ruled the city for the first thirty years of the twentieth century. I was surprised and, frankly, a little embarrassed I’d never heard of him before. But as I dove into the research about this man and the history of Omaha during this time period, I discovered that very few other people knew of him either. Not even native Omahans. Neither my grandparents nor my wife’s grandparents, all of whom had
lived in the city their whole lives, had heard of him. This excited me even further. How could such an important, colorful, and villainous figure in the city’s history be so unknown?

The research I have conducted also cemented this notion. There is only one book published about Dennison—a small, university press biography that is out of print. It took me a lot of work to track down a copy. Since discovering that book, I have dug even deeper. I took a trip back to Omaha last summer and spent ten days holed up in the public library going through old microfilm of newspapers from the time period. In that search, I accumulated over 100 articles about Dennison and his political machine. Many detailed his infamous, two-month long court trial in 1932 (the climax of his life and my novel) for violation of prohibition laws.

In fact, his political manipulation and violent reign over the city is a story that shocked me not just because it was all true but also because, to this day, it is nearly forgotten. The research I have conducted is exhaustive and hopefully will create a story not just about a political boss, but also a recreation of the history of the city itself from this time period.

The Synopsis

Upon arriving in Omaha from Colorado in 1892, Thomas Dennison quickly discovered a “wide open town” and found a mentor in newspaper tycoon Edward Rosewater, editor-in-chief of the now defunct *Omaha Bee*. Within seven years, just before the turn of the twentieth century, Dennison became the boss of Omaha’s three largest wards where he owned and operated numerous brothels, gambling dens, grog shops and retail businesses. His alliance with a young sheriff from Chadron, James Dahlman, soon evolved into a partnership that saw Mr. Dahlman elected as mayor for an unprecedented six terms, earning him the nickname “The Perpetual Mayor.” When it came to crime both small and large, including everything from petty crimping...
to murder to ballot stuffing, Dennison’s political and physical puissance in Omaha was unparalleled even in comparison to the likes of Richard Croker in New York City’s Tammany Hall. Dennison’s meteoric rise to power was matched only by his longevity. For thirty years he exploited municipal loopholes, wayward police officers and even elected officials as if he were operating a legitimate business no different than a corner grocery. By 1900, his control of city hall was so absolute that no crime was committed without his blessing and police reported to his office for their daily marching orders.

Yet as his power grew, so did the resiliency of his enemies as civic reformers, ousted Republicans, and federal investigators moved to destroy his machine at every turn. Recall forces seeking to purge Mayor Dahlman from office in 1909 after his firing of the police chief for conducting raids on Dennison-owned harems and gambling halls were quelled by a triple homicide that was never solved. From then on Dennison became so good a criminal that—as realized by a pair of Pinkerton detectives investigating his operations—by almost every provable maxim, he no longer was one.

Despite his power, Dennison’s reign over the city was continually contested and his downfall began long before it arrived. With his party’s first loss of the city elections following the end of World War I and the onset of state prohibition, Dennison incited the Omaha Race Riot of 1919 through yellow journalism in retribution against the new moral reform administration to prove they could not deliver on their promise to clean up crime in the city.

After the Douglas County Courthouse burned to the ground, the riots culminated with the most brutal lynching in the history of the entire country. An innocent black man falsely accused of raping a white woman had his neck tied to the bumper of an Oldsmobile and was dragged through the streets before being hung from a trolley pole only to be lowered again and burnt
down to his bones on a pyre in front of more than one-thousand onlookers. Thirteen years later, Harry Buford—Dennison’s lifelong negro chauffer and disgraced police lieutenant who witnessed his boss’s hand in the riots—betrayed the man who saved him and his family from poverty by becoming the federal government’s ace witness in the most publicized trial in the city’s history.

When Dennison and his syndicate faced 168 counts of conspiracy to violate the National Prohibition Act, the dark corners of his political machine came to light over a period of two months. Among those secrets were the murder of his one-time financial advisor George Lapidus who was handing over information to federal prohibition agents in return for immunity, his relationship with Al Capone to form a “Killer Squad” during prohibition, and how one of the largest bootlegging operations in the Midwest funded his spoils system of political patronage. Known at the time as “The Rum Trial”, it was one of the first uses of wiretapping evidence in a federal courtroom and led to Dennison’s exodus from the state and his violent assassination.

**The Problem**

Throughout the course of writing this novel, the most difficult question I faced was the balance between historical accuracy and narrative momentum. It is a challenge which every historical novelist must wrangle with, as Joanne Brown states in her article *Historical Fiction or Fictionalized History*: “The problems involve matters of definition, the ‘truth’ of historical fiction, the question of balance between historical details and fictional elements, the demand for authenticity and accuracy, and the issue of provenance…writers of historical fiction must also contend with another problem: the fine line between historicizing fiction and fictionalizing history. What is the ‘truth’ of historical fiction?” (7).
Perhaps an even more urgent question for historical novelists: what is more important—the history or the tale? The facts or the plot? The obvious but impossible answer is that both are equally crucial. The problem is that historical fact doesn’t always lend itself to a story line that would justify a commercial or literary treatment.

Jeffery R. Brooks weighs in on this issue in his critical essay, *Stranger than Fiction: Historical “Truth” in Malamud’s ‘The Fixer’ and Samuel’s ‘Blood Accusation’*, where he posits: “Many historians, on the other hand, are still committed to the notion that the division between history and fiction is far beyond a matter of arbitrary convention…History and fiction are undoubtedly two distinct disciplines…With truth confounding the history-fiction distinction rather than clarifying it, one may conclude that, especially since the midsixties, a new, more self-conscious, way of thinking about history has emerged to challenge the all-too-common ontological division of fact versus fiction.” (129).

I was well aware of this problem from the start. So after writing the prologue, I outlined every chapter of the entire novel before I began to write the actual pages, hoping that the factual information I had gathered through research would somehow all fit into something that resembled a plot. Of course, it did not. Thirty years of one man’s life and the history of entire city—even when focused to its political and criminal origins—is too large to create a narrative arc that would keep readers turning the pages. So the question changed. No longer was I asking myself if story or fact was more important. Instead I was asking myself: how much history can I alter to produce a good story without changing the actual events so much that they are no longer accurate enough to be considered historical fiction?

**The Solution**
In order to understand how much leeway I had as a writer working in this genre, I turned to other historical novelists for the answer. The solution to my problem of what and how much of the past could be changed in order to simply tell a good story could not be found in literary criticism or even historical scholarship. I wasn’t attempting to join the long existing debate on the topic or even looking for a distinct unit of measurement that would tell me what percentage of my work had to be historically accurate and what percentage I could create from imagination. I only wanted to know how other authors—the same writers who inspired my own work—faced this challenge.

Michael Chabon, addressing the very issue about his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, stated: “I have tried to respect history and geography wherever doing so served my purposes as a novelist, but wherever it did not I have, cheerfully or with regret, ignored them.” (637). Similarly, John Smolens discussed this problem with his novel *The Anarchist*, writing: “Historians understand that the pursuit of total accuracy, though a worthy and even valiant enterprise, is ultimately futile. Likewise, the fiction writer who mines the past for a story may attempt to be faithful to historical record, but to believe that one can actually succeed is the greatest fiction of all. Historical novels are, by nature, a unique amalgam of fact and fiction, conjecture and illusion…” (337).

Essentially, both Smolens and Chabon are claiming the same thing: it is impossible to capture history with total accuracy. I would imagine that even if such a task was possible, that is not the goal of historical novelists because we are not historical scholars. So when it came to difficult choices in writing *Gate City*, I sided in favor of narrative craft over factual precision.

Perhaps the most significant example of this decision came during my revision process. Too much of the first section of my book, “A Wide Open Town”, lacked forward narrative
momentum because I had written most of it still under the assumption that I had to be doggishly subservient to history rather than to fictional craft. Even with my devotion to history early in my first draft, there were large chunks of Dennison’s life and Omaha’s history that simply were not available for discovery. I should have realized then what I now know for certain: for all we know about our history, it is a very incomplete log, pieced together like scattershot. I had to rely on my imagination to fill in the missing gaps or there was no sense in continuing with this novel.

However, if all history is told as story, if the way we learn about history is through the device of story telling, then I still had a certain obligation to being as accurate as possible whenever I could. Thankfully, it is a much easier task to use history to your advantage as a novelist rather than using fictional craft to your advantage as a historian. This proved to be the case with the third and final part of my novel, “The Game is Worth the Cost”, when detailing the trial at the end of Dennison’s life for violation of the Volstead Act. In my research trip to Omaha in the summer of 2011, funded by a generous Excellence in Education scholarship, I discovered that trial and its proceedings were daily fare in the *Omaha World-Herald*. In fact, during its entire two-month duration, the “Rum Trial”, as it was called at the time, was front page material every day, save for two occasions. The *World-Herald* even published verbatim transcripts of the proceedings, everything from the opening statements to the questions and answers found in witness testimony. Such research and history enhanced my narrative instead of hindering it and, in many cases, I used the exact dialogue recorded in that fourth-floor courtroom between October and November of 1932. Of course, there was still a need for my own imagination to propel the narrative forward but, at long last, I had found a balance between history and fiction because I finally reconciled in my mind which was the priority.
**Historical Sources and Literary Influences**

Throughout the course of writing this book, I used many sources both for research and inspiration. Some of these works include material directly related to Dennison’s life, such as Orville Menard’s *Political Bossism in Mid-America: Tom Dennison’s Omaha, 1900-1933*. Other materials detail the history of Omaha itself, such as David L. Bristow’s *A Dirty, Wicked Town: Tales of 19th Century Omaha* and Jeffery Spencer’s *Remembering Omaha*. Other texts included nonfiction books that deal with material similar to my own, both in content and style, including Luc Sante’s *Low Life*, Nelson Johnson’s *Boardwalk Empire*, and Mike Dash’s *The First Family*.

I also made great use of newspapers from the era to achieve authenticity in my novel. In fact, newspapers were my most important and regular source of information. Not just Omaha newspapers, but newspapers from all over the country including New York, Detroit, and Kansas City. The period in which my novel takes place saw the birth and infancy of the radio, but the vast majority of information and advertising was spread via newsprint. Here I discovered clothing styles, fashion trends, the cost of a home, brands of popular cigars, competing ads for automobiles, the price of groceries, the type of food served in diners and cafes, and many other details that helped me color and build the world of an American city in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

My process of choosing which newspaper and historical date to research was random and wide-reaching. Sitting down at a microfilm reader without an agenda or specific bit of information to discover allowed me to simply find and take notes about anything and everything those historical newspapers could offer. I would often take a trip to the library, pick three random microfilm rolls from certain months in which my story was taking place, and comb through every part of them with a pen and notepad in hand, writing down any detail that seemed unique,
colorful and helpful. I read the daily comics to get an idea of how people actually spoke during this time period, a great help to me in composing my dialogue and making it period authentic. When encountering department store advertisements, I wrote down the styles of frames popular for women’s eyeglasses and what kind of children’s spring suits were on sale for the Easter holiday. Every bit of information was treated with equal importance, from the price of canned corn at a corner market or an article on a presidential campaign traveling through the Midwest. No fact was too big or too small and even the most seemingly insignificant detail—for example, mauve was the popular color in woman’s fashion in 1892—helped me better understand and immerse myself in this time period.

Conducting the bulk of my research in this fashion was certainly time consuming and even uneconomical, but also incredibly necessary for two reasons. First, I was hungry for facts and details that were not commonly used even by other historical novelists writing about this time period. Above all else, I wanted my details to not only be historically accurate, but also original and surprising when encountered by the reader. Second, I knew that a large part of the success in writing this book was going to be achieved by world-building much as it is a crucial factor for fantasy writers. I had to construct the entire world of Omaha in the first three decades of the twentieth century from scratch and the only way to build such a large setting is with an exacting tediousness in amassing the small details.

As for style, I condensed my reading material to a very select crowd of novels. In fact, I only read five other novels during the entire eighteen-month period in which I wrote Gate City: _The Lazarus Project_ by Aleksander Hemon, _Blood Meridian_ by Cormac McCarthy, _All the King’s Men_ by Robert Penn Warren, _Roscoe_ by William Kennedy, and _The Wettest County in the World_ by Matt Bondourant. In some cases, I reread certain sections of those novels more than
fifty times, studying how they created certain images, scenes and characters in order that I might be able to understand the magic behind their craft. I focused my reading list simply so I could learn from novels that employed large narrative scope, structure, wide casts of historical characters and complex plots. Considering all of these materials and sources—everything from novels and true crime accounts to historical texts about Omaha and a wide range of newspapers—I can only hope that the ensuing product captivates readers with the story of Tom Dennison and recreates the city of Omaha and its history, even when that history is, like much of all of our history, as many parts fable as it is fact.
Some people are good and some bad. Law can’t change them. Laws that people don’t believe in can’t be enforced if whole armies tried it. There are so many laws that people are either lawbreakers or hypocrites. For my part, I hate a damn hypocrite.

Tom Dennison
*Omaha Evening World Herald*
January 3, 1930
With the first whiskers of daylight on December 11, 1931, three men walked along the roadbed of the Aksarben Bridge. Out in front by five paces was Tom Dennison, followed by two of his closest associates--Milton Hoffman and Harry Buford. All three were similarly dressed: dark herringbone suits with matching waistcoats, watch chains looped just above their pant lines, Florshiem dress shoes and felt homburgs each of different color--Tom’s a tawny brown, Harry’s a simple black, and Milton’s a lipstick-red Elwood with a pink band. The footpath along the shoulder of the bridge was narrow, forcing them into a single-file arrangement. It was early on a Sunday, the temperature just a few degrees above freezing with a clear sky, not a streetcar in sight.

Milton--the shortest and fattest of three--carried a red gas can, its contents sloshing with each step. He stood five foot seven with a rotund physique that gave him the appearance of a patsy but, during his teenage years in New Orleans, he’d been a two-time, bare-knuckled fisticuffs champion who everyone called “Barrel.” Harry, a retired negro police officer and Tom’s longtime chauffeur, applied hair wax to his conk haircut with a comb as he walked, squeezing his hat under his arm.

As they approached the middle of the bridge, Tom put on a pair of wire-rimmed, owlish spectacles and checked his pocket watch. Milton tipped back a gunmetal flask. Harry struggled to fit a pair of tight leather gloves over his hands. Below them a paddlewheeler slugged down the Missouri. The new sun turned the water the color of poured fire. A warm winter day was
expected--a high of forty-two degrees--and the river had yet to freeze that season. On the
Nebraskan side of the water there were three flat shipment pallets piled high with blond stone
dredged from the river bottom. When they reached the center of the Aksarben--a truss bridge
roofed with steel beam struts, the first roadway to connect Iowa and Nebraska--Tom stopped.

“Wait here,” he said to Milton and Harry as he approached the brick toll booth.

Standing outside the booth was a young man wearing a chauffeur’s cap and a change-
dispensing satchel with four metal slot tubes, one for each kind of coin, slung down the front of
his chest. Tom lit an unfiltered Gauloise and offered the toll worker one from his soft blue pack.
He accepted, nodded his thanks and lit the end with a match he struck against his own stubbly
cheek.

“That’s a neat trick,” Tom said.

“My girlfriend won’t kiss me if I don’t shave. Says my face is rougher than sandpaper.”

Tom took a closer look at the man’s facial growth, which appeared at least three days old.

“You must not like getting kissed, then.”

“My girlfriend is out of town,” the toll worker replied and pointed to the two men
standing twenty feet down the bridge path. “You fellas not have a vehicle?”

Tom smiled. “We have nine cars, friend. Just out for a morning stroll is all.”

“Nine cars? What, you run a taxi service of some kind?”

“Something like that.”

The toll man spit over the bridge ledge. “Out for a stroll in this cold? Odd fish. I get paid
to stand out in it and I’m thinking of a new line of work.”

“How many tolls would you say you normally collect on a morning like this?”

“Not many. Not even tallied a whole dollar yet and I’ve been out here since three.”
“You haven’t happened to see a series 314, 1927 Cadillac Coupe with maroon paint come through here in that time, have you?”

“Can’t say I have. Seen me a couple Model As and a DeSoto with a kind of cream color. A green roadster, too. No Cadillacs, though.”

“You sure of that?”

“Yes sir. I’d surely remember a Cadillac of that color. Don’t see many of them on this bridge.”

“You from the bluffs’ side?”

The toll worker shook his head. “Omaha.”

Tom reached into his overcoat pocket, produced an ostrich leather wallet and, widening its mouth, retrieved fifteen dollars in crisp, unfolded bills. He handed the notes to the toll keeper. “How about you head over to Bell’s diner down there at the bridge port and have yourself a warm breakfast and a couple cups of coffee.”

The man held the money in his hand as if he’d never seen so much in his whole life. “And leave the booth unattended? Reckon I get fired over something like that.”

“Just for an hour or so. Maybe two. You said you were thinking of a new line of work, anyhow, didn’t you?”

“Yes sir, but that’s just the kettle blowing steam. I’ve been through three jobs in the last year and with things they way they is, depression and all, I can’t smartly give this one up. Who knows when another would come down the line.”

Tom dropped his cigarette on the ground, snubbed it out with a twist of his sole and pulled out another banknote, a twenty spot. “You can put that first fifteen towards your meal and for any tolls you might miss. This twenty you can use for a hot towel shave down at Ernie’s
barbershop and take your lady to dinner and a picture show. All I’m asking for is an hour. Go on and put an out-to-lunch sign in the window if it makes you feel better.”

“We don’t get lunch hours. I eat out of a pail.”

Tom pulled back his overcoat at the hip to reveal a flash of the pearl pistol handle in a holster along his beltline. “Don’t you worry about your job. It’ll be here for you when you get back from that breakfast. Now, I’m asking politely. Go have yourself some hotcakes and a platter of eggs,” he said, chewing on the inside of his lip. “Ask for Margie. She’s a good waitress. Give her a dollar tip and you might even find yourself getting more than a kiss despite that fuzz on your face.”

The toll worker took his eyes off the gun at Tom’s side, touched the brim of his hat in a gesture of gratitude and said, “Haven’t had me a sit-down restaurant breakfast for a good while. Sounds might nice about now, being so cold out and all. Don’t reckon any folks will miss paying them tolls anyhow.”

“That’s a smart lad,” Tom replied. “Remember what I said about asking for Margie. A real daisy she is.”

“Yes sir, I imagine so,” the toll worker said and headed west down the bridge towards the city. “Thanks much. Mighty generous of you.”

“Not at all.” Tom grimaced slightly as he raised the flat of his hand over his brow to shield his eyes from the new sun. He waited until the young man was halfway down the pedestrian walkway, out of earshot. He then signaled to Milton and Harry, who were sharing a switch-blade comb as they parted their hair in the reflection of a handheld mirror. They stood up straight, replaced their homburgs on their heads and walked towards the booth as a Packard Twin
Six Limousine came rolling across from the Iowa side of the bridge. Tom stepped out into the middle of the lane and the vehicle slowed to a stop.

The driver scrolled down his window and Tom leaned over to address him. “No tolls today. A little Sunday morning special for all those entering ‘The Good Life’,” he said with a smile, referencing the Nebraska state motto on all signs that welcomed motorists across the border. Without a word, the driver cranked up his window and proceeded along his way.

“You two and your goddamned hair,” Tom said to his men after the car passed. “Put that comb away. Look alive.”

“Right you are, boss,” Harry said.

“And Milt, stow that flask for three seconds, would you? It’s a church day and we’re working.”

Milton capped his whiskey and slid it into his trouser pocket. His face was flushed red.

“He come through here yet?”

“Toll man said no. Be surprised if he did. George was never much for punctuality.” Tom motioned toward the booth house. “You both wait it out in there. Shouldn’t be more than half past the hour before our dear friend comes along. And if any other cars happen by, just wave them on. Don’t make a scene out of it.”

“Won’t be no scenes. Folks hate them tolls as it is,” Harry said and followed Milt inside the booth.

Tom wiped his brow with a handkerchief and once again flipped open his timepiece. It was approaching eight o’clock. The moon was still in the sky, low and fat. He walked thirty yards down the bridge, stood against the concrete barrier and, with one hand in his vest pocket, surveyed the eastern expanse of the city before the bustle of the day began.
Electric streetlamps were still lit, giving off a dim, brown glow. Smokestacks poured out plumes of coal exhaust. Power lines and crisscrossing streetcar cables sagged over brick-paved streets. From his vantage point on the bridge there was a clear line of sight all the way down Douglas Street, which divided downtown Omaha into two halves. Though it was currently empty of any commerce, during the height of the evening hours it was lively with drunkards, gamblers, newspaper boys peddling headlines, organ grinders with their brimless hats, women twirling sun umbrellas, and portly livestock commission men alike, many of whom Tom knew by name. He considered himself a friend to all walks of life.

Nearly everything in sight either belonged to him outright or the owners were careful enough to pay him a gratuity: the dollar store bunco games run out of stationary boxcars down by the railroad depots, the independent groceries and stopgap pantries on Sheely Block and Goose Hallow with their pyramid stacks of soup cans and barrels of burnt peanuts, the French Bazaars and smoking parlors and soda rooms with their checkered tile flooring and felt walls. Also: taverns and billiards halls, hotels that doubled as cribs, and industrial grain elevators that poked high above the rest of the stubbed skyline. Along the southernmost block in view, squat mercantile storage buildings and red-bricked warehouses occupied the wholesale district. Even St. Catherine’s Hospital and the meatpacking houses in the Union Stockyards owed Tom percentages.

Twenty more minutes passed. In that time, four other vehicles crossed the bridge--a Velie Roadster and a Butter-Nut Coffee delivery truck among them--but no Cadillac. Tom shuffled back and forth and checked the magazine of his Colt after removing it from his waist holster--a handsome, nickel-plated pistol that was a gift from the Omaha Chief of Police for his sixtieth
birthday. Milt and Harry also grew anxious inside the toll booth. Milton lit a ten-cent White Orchid cigar and nervously flicked the ash onto the ground.

“Christ,” Harry said and pointed to the gasoline canister. “Your liable to burn us alive in here.”

“Relax, Nancy. The jug is capped. I ain’t your wife and I ain’t a nimrod. Appreciate it if you didn’t talk to me like either.”

“Well, you sure act like it sometimes.”

“Looky there,” Milt said and gestured through the booth window with his cigar. “Here comes our boy now.”

Harry stepped outside and squinted down to the bottom of the bridge. Sure enough it was the vehicle they’d been expecting—a dark red, convertible Cadillac coupe. Catching sight of it, Tom stepped behind one of the large metal trusses of the bridge to remain hidden and signaled his two men by pointing at his eyes.

As the Cadillac neared, it slowed to a stop at the toll both. The man behind the wheel cranked down his window and held out a single dollar, waiting for change. Harry withdrew his Browning Auto 5 shotgun from under his coat, aiming the barrel at the man’s head. Milt picked up the gas can, tugged on the brim of his hat, and both stepped out to the middle of the eastbound lane.

“Pull your car up ten feet and put the transmission in park,” Harry instructed the driver as he moved to the front of the Cadillac, his shotgun aimed at the windshield.

The driver of the car, George Lapidus, a prominent civic reformer dressed in a tired brown suit, took his hands off the wheel and held them up in a sign of surrender.
“Slowly now,” Harry said as George drove a few feet away from the booth. Once the car nudged forward, the engine still running, Harry held out his palm to halt the car. Milton stepped behind the vehicle through the hiccupping exhaust and set the kerosene jug on the road. Inside the coupe were two passengers when they’d only expected one, the other being a young woman with a pale complexion and auburn hair. She was still wearing a sequined night dress and a cloche hat pulled down to her eyebrows.

With the gait of a man on a leisurely stroll, Tom appeared from behind the bridge truss and made his way over to the driver’s side window. He paused to examine the car’s interior. Two tartan suitcases, a leather portmanteau, a guitar case, three cans of motor oil, and an empty bird cage rested on the back seat bench. The female passenger, though her lipstick was smeared as if applied in a funhouse mirror, was no doubt pretty enough to try her luck on the stage. She stared straight ahead at the dashboard.

Tom nodded to Milt, concealed his pistol behind his back and put his other hand on the roof of the car. “Going on a vacation are you, George?” he asked, poking his head in the window.

“My mother’s sick. I’m going to visit her in Indiana. Wasn’t going to be more than a couple days, honest.”

Tom grinned. “George, I have no doubts your mother is in Indiana. But she’s not sick, she’s dead. Been that way for four years. Strange, unless you received some tardy telegram half a decade late, I’d say you were lying to me.”

George closed his eyes tightly and touched his forehead to the steering wheel.

“Be a good sport and turn off that engine, would you?” Tom said as he patted the roof of the car.
George did as instructed and removed the key from the ignition. Milton lifted the gas can onto the coupe’s rear bumper and Harry re-sighted his shotgun directly at George’s head.

“Please, Tom, really, all that stuff you’ve been hearing about that goddamned investigation, I had nothing to do with it. It was—”

“Shhh,” Tom cooed. “Don’t be rude. You haven’t even introduced me to your lady friend here. What’s your name, darling?”

The woman remained silent.

“This has nothing to do with her. Let her alone,” George said.

Tom addressed the woman. “Why, you look just like Greta Garbo,” he said and straightened up to a standing position. “Doesn’t she, boys?”

“She’s a sight prettier than Miss Garbo, boss,” Harry said, the buttstock of his Browning still shouldered. “Ought to have her face on a poster sheet.”

Tom once again lowered his face into the car. “Such a shame, miss. What is a beautiful woman like you doing hanging out with the likes of this lot?”

“I told you to leave her out of this,” George said.

“If you wanted her left out, you shouldn’t have tosed her away with you on your little escapade here.”

“I’m not escaping from nothing. I told you.”

“Right. You’re going to visit your dear old mother who’s come down with the flu even though she’s buried in a plot at Calvary Cemetery in Windsfield, Indiana. I’m no doctor, but I can’t say I’ve ever heard of a corpse running a fever.” Tom looked towards Milt at the back of the car. “What about you, Barrel? You ever heard of such a thing?”
“Can’t say I have,” Milt replied just as another car, a black Ford V8, came over the bridge. It slowed as it neared the coupe.

Harry redirected the barrel of his shotgun towards the gawking driver and shouted, “On your way now.”

The car regained speed and passed without incident.

“Traffic’s picking up. Folks on their way to church,” Milt said.

In reply, Tom stepped back out of the way and Milt came over with the gas can. He poured its pink contents through the car window over George in a flourish, soaking his face, hair and suit. Gasoline puddled in his lap and ran down into his socks. His hair was flattened by it, dripping down into his eyes. He reached for the door handle but before he could exit the Cadillac, Harry was already on the move, his shotgun still raised, and kicked the door shut on George’s hand.

“Uh, uh, uh,” Harry said, aiming. “You just sit tight right theres.”

George screamed out and sat back again in his seat. He held his bleeding hand against his chest. He couldn’t bend his fingers. Two of them were nearly sliced off, hanging on only by the slightest filament of bone. His mistress was also being doused in gasoline from the opposite window but put up no fight. She sat in a serene daze as Milt shook the canister until it was dry and tossed it on the ground.

“You all ain’t nothing but a bunch of goddamn schoolyard bullies,” George said as the blood from his hand poured down his shirt. “You don’t get your way or somebody thinks something different than you do and you go and snub them out. You are a fucking coward, Mr. Dennison.”
Tom stepped forward once again to the car window, his Colt pistol slack at his side.

“That’s some ugly language, especially for an upstanding businessman such as yourself. And in front of such a prim-looking starlet, no less.”

“I’m no starlet,” the woman finally spoke.

Tom shuffled back. “Well, she does talk. How about that? Maybe that’s why you like her so much. Unlike your wife, who can’t shut her mouth even when she’s chewing food, this one right here is the quiet type.”

“You go to hell,” George replied, still gripping his mangled hand.

The woman burst out of the passenger door and sprinted down the bridge. She kicked off her heels in her first three steps and continued to run barefoot, leaving wet footprints on the concrete.

Tom watched her for a moment before Harry took careful aim with his shotgun like a hunter in no hurry to hit his mark and unloaded directly into the back of her head with a single shot. Her hat whizzed off into the air and she fell face first to the pavement as if she had tripped. Harry lowered the gun and picked up the discarded cartridge at his feet.

“That’s a real shame,” Tom said and clicked his tongue twice.

“You murderer! I told you she had absolutely nothing to do with this. I only met her last month. Goddamn you!”

Tom reached in and patted George on his head. “I don’t know what you take me for, George. I get the feeling you think I’m some kind of Boss Tweed whose only aspiration in life is to sit back and conceive of ways to stuff ballot boxes and get my picture on the cover of some tobacco label in my favorite top hat. What you forgot long ago is I’m no politician and I’m certainly no murderer. But my two associates here? Well, they didn’t get up early on this fine
Sunday morning to say their prayers. But in this case, we may just stop by St. Johns and say a prayer for your and dearly departed mistress. Goodbye, Mr. Lapidus.”

Then, with no instruction or pause of any kind, Milt came forward and tossed his lit cigar stub through the car window onto Harry’s lap. He burst into flame and rolled out of the Cadillac. He screamed and flapped his arms wildly, as if trying to take flight. The fire grew until it engulfed his entire body.

They watched him flop about and stumble around in circles. He collapsed twice to his knees, attempting to snuff out the flames with his hands. Tom was quick to look in both directions to ensure no other vehicles were approaching. In a matter of seconds, George reached the edge of the bridge barrier and was about to jump over the side. Before he was airborne, Tom raised his pistol and fired four bullets into his back just as launched himself from the railing. All three men watched as he somersaulted some seventy feet below into the Missouri. Fire lapped off his body as he fell and landed with a hard plop in the water, smacking the surface with the force of concrete. Momentarily his body sunk and reemerged, bobbing like a buoy. Then it disappeared entirely until it was discovered some three hundred miles south and six weeks later by a father and son fishing for mud carp along the river bank.
It requires but little, if any, stretch of the imagination to regard Omaha as a cesspool of iniquity, for it is given up to lawlessness and is overrun with a horde of fugitives from justice and dangerous men of all kinds who carry things with a high hand and a loose rein...If you want to find a rogue’s rookery, go to Omaha.

_The Kansas City Evening Star_
March 21, 1899
Towards the end of his three-decade reign in Omaha--not more than a year after the disappearance of George Lapidus and nearly a full month into his federal trial for violation of Nebraska’s prohibition law--Tom Dennison turned seventy-four years old. To celebrate his birthday, he hosted eight of his closest associates at an elaborate dinner in his Flatiron Hotel. Furnished with handspun carpet, parquet floors, fresco plastered hallways, tall oil paintings in thick gold frames, chocolate and carmine-colored velour settees, armchairs as large as bishop cathedras, Tom’s hotels were the priciest and most envied buildings in all of Nebraska. Of these, the Flatiron was his favorite.

It was the last week in October of 1932, five days before Halloween. Already a light snow fell outside as gently as dust swept off a rooftop. Night had long since arrived and the lobby restaurant was empty save for the long table at which Tom and his friends dined. Though he’d survived two minor strokes in the past year, his head completely bald and his hands liver-spotted, Tom still cast an intimidating posture even while seated. Standing six foot even, with wide shoulders and weighing a shade over two-hundred pounds, his early years of hard labor--a farmhand, wood chopper, railroader, and miner in open-pit shafts--were still visible in his build. Once remarkably handsome with ocean gray eyes and a prominent Adam’s apple, his eyelids and throat now sagged loosely. He adorned his fingers with large onyx and diamond rings, dressed in finely tailored suits, and walked with the aid of a lacquered cane.

He was a man of strict routine. Every morning he whipped his own shaving soap in a copper mug with a horsehair brush and ate a green apple with a glass of iced milk. Before
attending to any of the day’s business, he went down to the lagoon at Hanscom Park to feed the
pigeons with seed and candy he scattered on the sidewalk as the sky filled with color. He took
simple lunches--almost always a cheese sandwich smeared with white mustard and a wooly
peach washed down with sizzling mineral water. In the evenings he relaxed by reading blood-
and-thunder novels while listening to medicine shows on his Zenith tube radio.

He was an avid attendee of the theatre and movie houses, taking at least one night of
every week to see a show no matter how busy his schedule, be it mainstream attractions such as
Clark Gable in China Seas, the weekly newsreels, or the nickelodeons with their stop-motion car
chase pictures backed by music pounded out on a side piano. He kept a backyard garden were he
grew zucchinis and rhubarb to make his own preserves. A lover of animals, he took great pride in
breeding dogs, specifically the wirehaired terriers that won him many a dog show ribbon. He was
a registered Republican but made no scruples in backing a Democratic candidate for office.

Though he had originally made a name for himself in Colorado saloons, and later came to
own over seventy taverns in Omaha’s third ward and kept his first booking office in a small
room behind a beer cooler, Tom never drank. It was not a moral principle. He simply did not
want alcohol to cloud his mind. He had a cauliflower ear from his many fights as a youth--the
most violent of all being a confrontation with a miner who, wielding a bowie knife, sought him
down in the street after losing a good sum of money in a policy wheel game. In the course of
dodging a few rabbit-punches and a scuffle in the dirt, Tom ended the brawl by sinking a pickaxe
into the man’s skull, earning him his first nickname: Pickaxe Tom. Now seventy-four years old,
he was The Old Man or, in the newspapers, The Old Gray Wolf.

His nose was crooked from three breaks suffered in similar fights. There was a small gap
between his two front teeth and his thin lips were nearly colorless. Before going bald, he kept his
ginger-colored hair clipped short above the ear and tamed his wild cowlicks with hair mayonnaise.

He could be docile and reserved one moment, frenzied and homicidal the next. He wavered from serenity to vociferant eruptions, often with little provocation. Yet, for all his edginess, he was also uncommonly polite and thoughtful to the point of excess. He stood when ladies entered the room, addressed even those well below his stature as “sir” or “ma’am,” and was overly lavish towards anyone who was ever fortunate enough to be invited to his table.

So it was that after his birthday meal was finished—an exquisite offering of smoked Atlantic herring topped with banana puree, stuffed quail, oyster scallops, chilled blueberry soup, asparagus soufflé and bacon-wrapped water chestnuts—Tom presented his guests with Honduras cigars, Swedish coffee boiled with eggshells, tiny hand-painted carafes of goat’s milk and snifters filled with apricot brandy.

Among those at the table were: Loup Newman—a close friend of Al Capone who’d traveled all the way from Chicago at the behest of his boss who couldn’t make the journey himself because he was in an Atlanta penitentiary; James Dahlman—the Omaha “cowboy mayor” who Tom had successfully put into office for an unprecedented six consecutive terms and was never seen in any garb besides his silver Stetson and pointed-toe boots; Joe Potach and Walter Psznawoski—both retired Omaha police officers; Tom Pendergast—a Kansas City political kingmaker much like Dennison himself; and Milton Hoffmann and Billy Nesselhous, his longtime right-hand men.

As the post-dinner talk subsided, Tom began to share one of his many beloved stories. Remaining seated at the head of the table, he spoke softly but clearly, the din of clanking silverware and glasses quieting immediately, and said:
“I want to thank you all for coming here tonight. Some of you have traveled a considerable distance to be with me this evening and I want to acknowledge that. It is a true pleasure, one of life’s fine gifts, to be amongst friends and allies on one’s birthday. I’m surprised I’ve lasted this long. I bought this hotel for sixty-thousand dollars in 1914 back when it was still used as an office space. That seems like quite a lot considering what real estate used to sell for. Which brings to mind a story I’ve always appreciated when it comes to matters of business ambition.

“I’m sure some of you are familiar with the name George Francis Train. The man was about one remove from pure lunacy, but some might say to flirt with asylum is to flirt with genius, which was certainly the case with Mr. Train. Now this is many years ago, before a good number of you at this table were born, but Train, he came to Omaha in 1863, right smack in the middle of the Civil War. Four years later, he was having breakfast at The Herndon, a hotel much like this, the only real hotel worthy of any comment in the whole city at the time, when a tornado came rushing through the plains. He was seated at a table near a large window and he beckoned his negro waiter to stand in front of that window to protect him from flying glass during the storm.

“Well, the manager of that hotel, a forward-thinking man with more,” Tom stalled and considered his words carefully, “racial sensitivity than Mr. Train ordered his waiter away from the window. Now, to understand George, the only thing he catered to more than his eccentricities was his ego. So he let his breakfast go cold on his plate and stood in front of that window himself until the cyclone passed. The next morning he returned to the block where the Herndon stood and purchased a vacant lot across the street for three thousand dollars. A week later, he brought
in a contractor from San Francisco and offered him five hundred dollars a day to build a three-
story hotel in three months.

“After that old Train retreated into the Rocky Mountains, his business there being God
knows what. Like I said, he was a bit of loose screw. In fact, about half a decade later, during the
presidential race of 1872, he thought it was a good idea to run against Grant. He was so sure of
his coming victory at the polls that for a whole year he ended his signature with the letters
N.P.A., which stood for ‘Next President of America.’ If memory serves, I believe he failed to receive one single vote. He even voted against himself because he didn’t want to tip the ballots further towards the landslide victory he predicted to go in his favor,” Tom said, which was
followed by a burst of laughter from his guests.

“Crazy or not, when he returned after sixty days, his hotel was finished. 120 rooms of the finest order. Do any of you know the name of that hotel?” Tom paused, though only momentarily, and tossed his napkin on his plate.

He continued, “That place was The Cozzen’s Hotel. It’s since been torn down, but for many good years it was the show pony of the city. He rented rooms to celebrities and dignitaries and traveling businessmen of note. Some paid a thousand dollars a night for their stays during a time when most homes didn’t cost that much. Even president Grant ending up spending a night there. Meanwhile, the Herndon went flat out of business and the manager of that hotel who instructed his negro waiter away from the window lost his job all because it could not compete with Mr. Train’s palace across the street. Now, that is the long way of illustrating a point I have always lived by and something I believe each one of you will do well to remember in your own endeavors. Anger is a powerful tool in all things in life. More than greed, more than pure ambition, more than any amount of know-how or gumption, spite and rage trump all. I’ve not
told that story to many, but I fear my time here in this city is growing short, as you are all aware of. If I am to depart soon, I wanted to leave you here tonight with those words. Never underestimate a man with purpose. But especially never underestimate a man with anger in his heart.”

* * *

At the end of the evening, after hearty farewells and handshakes, after birthday gifts were exchanged--all of them flecked envelopes carrying newly minted bills--after the crystal ashtrays were extinguished with water, after some of his finest women were sent up with his guests to their balconied suites, and after all the dinnerware was washed and stacked while still scalding hot, Tom exited his beloved hotel for the final time.

It was a few minutes past eleven. The snow had stopped and a scarf of river fog blew over from the east. The streets glittered with a thin layer of frost. He carried a saddleback leather briefcase under one arm and his bowler hat was tucked under the other. On the curb outside, his driver stood against the side of his Chrysler Series 66 sedan. Two other men--armed with twenty-pound, gas-operated BARs--flanked the hotel entrance as they did every night. The driver greeted his boss with a minimal exchange of words, opened his door, started the engine and began the short drive to Tom’s Tudor-style mansion in the Gold Coast neighborhood at 40th and Jones Street.

The estate, built of brown brick with a golden cupola, sat on a half acre of land and was well protected with a five-foot-tall cyclone fence. The yard, shaded by poplars and Japanese cherry blossom trees in the summers, was guarded with the wirehaired terriers Tom had raised
and bred for most of his adult life. His two grandchildren from his first marriage, Sonya and Christopher, lived with him in the house along with his maid staff and were, by that time, warm in their beds.

The six-minute drive passed without a word shared between the two men. The light from passing streetlamps flickered through the car windows. Tires rumbled over manhole covers and dips in the pavement. During the entire ride, out of habit, Tom kept a Thompson submachine gun with a 50-round drum in his lap, covered by a blanket. As they neared the house on that late October night, he undid the top button of shirt and loosened his collar as his eyes drooped with sleep.

When he entered his foyer, he treded lightly up the stairs so as not to wake his grandchildren--both of whom he discovered sleeping in his oak sleigh bed. Without turning on a light, he sat staring at them in the dark from his upholstered armchair. Finally he undressed. He removed his shoes and sock supporters. His pocket watch clicked against a glass of water on the nightstand. He hung his suit on a wooden hanger to be taken in for dry-cleaning by his valet the next morning and swallowed two aspirin as per his doctor’s orders following his stroke that past Christmas. His hands shook as he climbed into bed, situating himself between his grandchildren.

Sonya woke in a groggy daze, turned over and said, “We were scared, Bope. We heard noises outside.”

“It’s just the house settling. Go back to sleep now,” Tom whispered and petted his granddaughter’s head. In his old age, he found it harder and harder to fall asleep in a timely fashion. He often sat up for hours in bed before he was relaxed enough to close eyes. As he listened to the ticking of his gilt wall clock, his mind wandered from one thought to the next and despite the fact that he was so close to the end, so near his own impending downfall and violent
demise, his thoughts were not of what was to come, but what had already been long ago: a young man on a steam engine train, heading east across the prairie from Leadville, Colorado.

* * *

Spring, 1892. Still one of the hottest seasons on record. By late May, the mercury shot into the triple digits in many of the southern states. Tom, then just thirty-four years old, sat in the smoking cabin of a ten-wheeler locomotive. He’d boarded the train with his friend, Cliff “Soapy” Farrell, at a platform in Oro City, just a few miles outside of Leadville. Twenty-three years earlier, the track of the Union Pacific Railroad finally connected with the Central Pacific Rail at Promontory Point, creating the nation’s first transcontinental railway and making it possible for men and women of all ranks to ride large distances without emptying their pocketbooks.

After the tender finished filling with water from a steel pipe crane, the brakes hissed and the train inched forward until it gained full speed on a downhill grade. Smears of spatula-flat pasture, interrupted only by the occasional weathered barn house or cluster of cottonwoods, zoomed by through the windows. A conductor in a brass-button jacket came through and punched tickets. There were not many people in the smoking car that day due to the heat--Tom, his friend, and five others.

Tom purposefully took a seat four rows ahead of Soapy as part of their planned game and both acted as if they were complete strangers. To further their charade, Soapy dressed as a yokel farmer though he’d never once bailed hay or milked a cow--faded coveralls, a tattered slouch hat and boots without socks. Tom wore his usual outfit: a wool suit that was making him sweat
profusely. He attended to the loose scraps of paper in his briefcase, pretending to be engrossed by his work.

Tom’s final destination was Omaha; Soapy was headed towards St. Joseph’s, Missouri, where he was to take over his father’s furniture store. But in between--both having worked together in a number of gambling halls off and on for the past six years--they hoped to make a few dollars along the way before they parted for good.

Three hours into their ride, after picking up more passengers at two different depots, Soapy spotted their first target: a bow-tied musician wearing a stovepipe hat who occupied the seat behind him. The man began to hum on his dented harmonica. Soapy slid down in his seat and tipped the wide brim of his hat over his eyes, feigning sleep. He waited a few minutes and let the man continue to play on his mouth organ until the moment was right.

Finally he sat up, looked back at the man and said, “Hey fella, would you mind giving that kazoo a rest? I’m trying to get me a lil’ shut eye.”

The man removed the instrument from his lips. “This isn’t a kazoo. It’s a harmonica.”

Soapy pushed his hat back. “What’s this now, fella? What did you say?”

“This is a harmonica.”

“Baloney. I know a damned kazoo when I see one.”

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken. But don’t you worry, I won’t play it any longer. You go on and get your sleep.”

“Care to put money on that?” Soapy asked.

“Don’t be thick. I wouldn’t dream of such a thing. You’d surely lose.”

Soapy continued the act. “How’s fifty dollars sound? Or ain’t you got the gall?”

“And how would we settle such a wager?”
“Why, we’d get a third-party opinion is all. Just pick someone here in this car and ask him. Whichever he says is the winner,” Soapy said and scanned the train as if randomly considering all of its passengers. He pointed towards Tom. “What about that feller up there in the gray suit?”

“This is asinine. You’re just going to lose your money. I can’t in good conscience—”

“Ah, spare me your conscience. If I’m wrong, then I ought to lose. If you’re so sure, then you ought to win,” Soapy said and hollered down the car towards Tom.

Tom turned around slowly, a look of befuddlement on his face.

Soapy waved at him. “Yeah. You. Us two is trying to settle a bet. Can you come over here? We need your help deciding something.”

Tom stood and walked down the aisle. “What is all this about?”

“All right, fork it over,” Soapy said and placed fifty dollars in Tom’s hand.

The musician hesitated. “Fifty dollars is nearly all I got,” he said. “Took me a month of playing shows every night to earn this.”

“Do I look like I got money coming out of my ears? Besides, if you’re so sure of yourself, a hundred dollars is about to be all you have,” he said. After the musician’s share was handed over, Soapy turned to Tom. “Now, sir, all you got to do is answer a simple question for us. We having a disagreement. And whichever answer you give is the final say-so. Is that thing right there a harmonica or a kazoo?”

The musician held up the tiny windbox in his hands.

Tom scratched his head and wiped his brow.

“C’mon, c’mon,” Soapy said hurriedly. “What say you?”

“Why, that there is without a doubt a kazoo.”
The musician sprang up. “The hell you say! A kazoo is long and skinny. A kazoo is a child’s toy. This here is rectangular. This here is an instrument, not some party favor.”

Tom handed all the money to Soapy. “Sorry, pal. But I must disagree with you.”

“Disagree? This isn’t a matter to disagree on. It’s a fact. Ask someone else on this train. Anyone else. They’d all say the same thing. You boys are in on it together. Let me pick the judge. Then we’ll see. I’ve heard about these games run on these trains—” The musician stopped short as he felt something hard pressed against his stomach. He looked down and saw Tom sticking a Schofield revolver in his belly.

“Sorry, friend,” Tom said calmly, pulling back the hammer. “I do believe a bet is a bet. No crying foul. You agreed to the terms.”

The musician backed away slowly and Tom lowered his pistol. But, before the man could retake his seat, Soapy stepped forward and stuck him in the gut with a flensing knife. He twisted the blade, then pulled it out sideways.

“That outta teach you for arguing a bet, you dumb miser,” he said and pushed the man down onto the floor. “Reckon this is our stop,” he continued and yanked on the rope break above his head. The train jilted suddenly as the brakes were applied.

A woman with a babushka knotted over her head glanced back at the commotion and, upon seeing the musician bleeding out on the ground, screamed and buried her face in her seat. Other passengers in the front of the car also turned around. Someone screamed for a doctor.

The musician, putting pressure on his wound, hollered for help. “I’ve been stabbed by a couple of bilkers. Someone get the conductor!”

“Now you’ve gone and done it,” Tom said and slapped Soapy on the back of his head.

“What’s in your mind?”
“He was making a scene. And you’re too yellow to pull that shooter.”

“The man was backing down. Lord in heaven. You’re the one who made the damn scene.”

“Believe it’s time for a stage exit left,” Soapy said and, before the train came to complete halt, he and Tom jumped out of the boxcar with their belongings in tow.

They made a quick sprint down a short hill populated with scrub brush and mountain weed, kicking up dust as they went. Once they were a good half mile out from the tracks they paused and looked back at the train. Soapy was doubled over, hands on his knees. Tom panted and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. The afternoon sun was full over the jagged tops of the Rockies to the west. The arid landscape of eastern Colorado cooked white with heat. While they waited, Soapy uncorked a glass jug of water from his pack, took a hearty swig and passed it to Tom. Five more minutes passed and even though he had the mind to beat Soapy to within an inch of his life, Tom remained silent. A vein pulsated in his forehead. He bit down on his tongue until it bled. They kneeled in the scratchy shrubbery and waited longer. No one gave chase. Soon the train came to life again, smoke poured from the locomotive chimney, and it lurched forward until it was long down the line, out of sight.

* * *

That night they set up camp along a tiny sliver of forded brook. Tom got a small fire rolling with the flint and charcloth from his tinderbox. Soapy shaved with the same blade he’d stuck in the musician’s belly after wiping it clean. Both were exhausted after walking more than seven miles through the heat until the sun finally dipped to the other side of the earth.
Not a single word had been shared between them for the rest of the day. They refilled their canisters and jugs from the clear stream. Tom dried his wool socks by draping them on the end of stick and held them above the fire like bait on a fishing line. For dinner they munched on wafers wrapped in wax paper and sardines packed with peppers. Throughout the day they’d followed the rail tracks loosely, staying about a quarter mile out of sight. According to their wrinkled section of map, Sulfur Springs--the next railroad junction just before the Nebraska border--wasn’t more than five miles away. They’d be in town by noon tomorrow.

After replacing his socks on his feet, Tom bent his face into the brook and splashed water over the back of his neck. He pawed up more water into his hair until it was saturated and sat back down in front of the fire, dripping.

“I’m real sorry about all that back on the train,” Soapy said. “Still, things seemed to have worked alright. We can meet back up with the tracks in Sulfur.”

“It wasn’t long ago that men used to pan streams like this for placer gold,” Tom replied, ignoring the apology.

Soapy lay down on his back with his hands behind his head and stared up at the stars. “Still do. Some of them hard cases, anyways. Anymore they say the only gold left in this country is black. I was thinking of heading down to Louisiana or Texas or maybe even California and get me set up in the oil business. Work on a derrick for a couple years, save up until I can start one of my own. More oil than water down there. And no winters either. Three hundred days of summer a year down there, they say.”

“And what of your pop’s furniture store?”
“Reckon I sell it in the first year or so. Never was much of a retail man, myself. Peddling armchairs and describing the difference between wicker and maple to folks ain’t exactly my long end of a dream. What about you? You say you got some prospects in Omaha, have you?”

“One prospect. Not too sure of what it is myself. Don’t believe it’s much more than a muscle job of some kind. Some high and mighty newspaperman who’s friends with Fred was asking him if he knew of anyone interested in that sort of thing.”

“Omaha,” Soapy said. “Ain’t never been there myself. You?”

“Long years ago. When I was just a boy.”

“What’s it all about?”

“I hear it’s a wide open town,” Tom said, scooping up more water from the stream into his hair to cool his head. “A city on the rise.”

“Think you’ll stay long?”

“No longer than I was here. I get antsy, you know. Too much time in any one spot makes a man go stale.”

“Ain’t that the truth. I’ll be fifty and still roaming, most likely.”

“Speaking of fifty, how’s about my half?”

Soapy sat up and stared at Tom from across the fire pit.

“My half,” Tom said again. “From the train.”

“About that, I was hoping you might let me hold onto it for a while. Just until I make it to St. Joe’s. Once I get set up there I can mail you your split.”

Tom pulled his knees into his chest. “No, I think I’ll take it now. I got to get where I’m going, too.”

“I said I’ll mail it to you through the general post.”
“I can’t sit with that. We split it now. I got a notion to take it all seeing as how you gummed up the works. We could’ve made three times that with another full day under our belts if you could’ve just kept your head.”

“I already apologized for that.”

“An apology ain’t the same as money, though, is it?”

“Goddamn you’re one dense blower. What you need it for this second, anyhow? You planning on spending it somewhere around heres?”

Tom stood up quickly and straddled himself over Soapy. He lowered his face, chewed on this inside of his lip, and held out an open hand. “Give it over now. C’mon. Let’s have it.”

Soapy shoved Tom in the chest and rose to his feet. Tom stumbled back, nearly touching his feet to the fire.

“You want to have a go over twenty-five measly dollars?” Soapy said.

Tom reached down to his waist and drew the same revolver he’d shoved into the musician’s belly on the train. “You killed a man over that much already. What makes you think I won’t do the same on sheer principle?”

“There’s a nice pull. You’re going to shoot me right here in the middle of nowhere over an itsy bit of scratch?”

Tom remained silent, still aiming, his face aglow in the firelight.

“Well go on with it, then,” Soapy urged him. “You fancy yourself as some kind of tough, but I seen your stripe in all them dens we’ve worked together. You bluff at cards better than this and you sure ain’t no kind of actor behind a deck.”

Then, without a moment’s consideration, Tom fired three shots and hit him square in the throat with the last. It was dark and the other two bullets missed their mark entirely. Soapy
collapsed to his knees. He grabbed at his neck with both hands. He opened his mouth as if trying
to speak, but produced no sound. Finally, after gasping for air and making a small sound like
someone gurgling water, he fell over into the dirt. Tom waited a while, studying the body,
breathing laboriously through his nose. Then, after he was fairly certain he was dead, Tom
replaced his pistol into his holster and nudged the body with his foot. There was no movement.
He put a finger to Soapy’s mouth, checking for life. The bullet had mushroomed upon impact
and he could see through the hole to the back of Soapy’s spine. He stepped back again and,
following another pause, patted around in Soapy’s pockets until he found the bunco money.
After counting out the bills, he replaced half back in his partner’s trousers.

“There,” Tom said aloud. “Fair’s fair. Like I said, we split it now. Too bad we had to do
things the hard way.”

He bent over, grabbed the body at the ankles and dragged it a hundred feet out to the flats
past the creek. He covered it up with the few loose branches he could find in the dark and a
couple of big stones so any random passersby, either on foot or horseback, wouldn’t spot it, at
least for a few days. Circling crows might draw some attention in the morning. Beyond that he’d
be a whole state away. Bless the fool who discovers a dead nomad gambler dressed in farmer’s
clothes. After discarding the body, he washed his hands from his canteen and lit the end of a
half-smoked, green cigar he’d been saving. He rummaged through Soapy’s pack to ensure no
signs of his name were anywhere in his belongings. Satisfied with his findings--no diary, no
scribbled down names or train tickets--Tom doused the small fire, finished his cigar down to the
nub and slept the rest of the night next to the smoldering embers.

* * *
By the next midday he reached Sulfur Springs. He was hot and tired, his clothes stuck to his skin and his neck was burnt from the sun. At a local grocery he purchased a small tin of willow extract pills for headaches, a box of ammunition for his revolver and two bottles of cream soda. He paid for a three-dollar, refrigerated-air room in a tenement not far from the rail yard. After drawing the drapes, gleefully sucking down the sodas and chewing a handful of the pills, he slept off the rest of the night until the next morning.

He awoke at a quarter past eight to the sound of gunshots three floors below. Sulfur Springs--much like every other mining town in Colorado--was full of little more than gamblers and whores, so it wouldn’t be much of a Saturday morning without a firefight breaking out in a hotel barroom. Tom rose, filled his clawfoot bathtub and scrubbed his armpits and crotch with a rag until the water was grey. He turned his socks inside out so they were drier on his feet. Down in the lobby saloon, he ordered a breakfast of hominy grits and two wobbly eggs that he sopped up with brown toast. Sipping his second cup of steely coffee, he skimmed through the local paper, *The Valley Courier*, while he waited for the ten o’clock train to come through.

On page two there was a large headline that read: *Guitarist Stabbed On Train Over a Matter of Five Dollars*. Below those words was a grainy picture of the musician being helped off the rails by two police officers. Tom scanned the article for any sign of his name or description, but found none.

The bartender came over and refilled his cup from a blackened kettle.

“This has to be a misprint,” Tom said to him, pointing at the headline. “Who’d stab a fella for five dollars?”
“True as steel. Even less than that if you do the math. They say it was two boys who
knifed him. So they split two and a half per. This country is crumbling apart at the seams, nearly
killing a man over pennies.”

“Nearly?”

The bartender wiped his hands on his stained apron. “Man’s alive right there across the
street. They laid him up at Doc Richmond’s place. Doc’s real good with a needle and thread.
Crochets in his spare time. Sowed up his belly lickety-split. They say he’ll live. Say he can
identify them two who robbed him just as soon as he’s back on his feet.”

“That right?”

“Yessir. Hope he does. Doc was in here not long before you, having his self breakfast.
Does so every morning. Says the man’s got four children.”

Tom looked over his shoulder, out the window. “Ugly world.”

“You ain’t foolin.” The barkeep paused. “Will there be anything else?”

“No. Much obliged,” Tom said, paid his tab in coinage and walked out into the dusty
street. Across the way a horse-drawn bandstand was being unloaded. Shopkeepers dressed in
suspenders sat out in rocking chairs on the wooden sidewalks, thumbing their pipes. A raking
wind carried the thick stench of a nearby livestock pen full of spotted hogs. Walnut trees grew in
the alleyways between buildings. A water tower neatly blotted out the rising sun. Tom scanned
the main drag of the town for the names of businesses painted in flaking colors on picture
windows: cakes for sale, luncheon meats carved on the spot, billiards, and tap beer. He
considered the doctor’s home directly across the road where the musician was being cared for
and then headed towards the center of the main square where a druggist’s façade advertised
paints, oils, cigars, floor wax, and cutlery.
Upon entering the apothecary, he removed his hat and approached the counter. Tinted
glass bottles of syrup squills were arranged in rows on a front display shelf. Epsom salts, iodines,
clear colanders of hard candies, and a miniature scale sat along a sawhorse table. An ice cream
bar with three red stools was populated by jars of butterscotch and raisins, a siphon seltzer bottle,
sundae glasses stacked upside down on a long white towel, and a cluster of green bananas.

“Good day,” the druggist--a portly man in a white chemist’s coat--greeted him. “Help
you find something in particular?”

“Morning. You sell animal medicines here?” Tom asked.

“Surely. We’ve got veterinary supplies of all flavors. What kind of animal?”

“You wouldn’t happen to carry any chloroform?”

“I do sir, but only for doctor’s use. If you are wanting to put your animal down, I’d gladly
take care of it. Save you the trouble.”

Tom squinted at the rows of bottles behind the counter.

“What I can sell you, if you’re looking for a sedative, is a high-grade ether. Works just
about as well,” the druggist said and produced a lilac-tinted bottle from a drawer.

“I’ll take that. What do you have in stock for poisons?”

The druggist raised an eyebrow. “May I ask what your animal’s trouble is?”

Tom, with some pause, carefully imagined an answer. “Got a horse with a busted leg.
Can’t even stand up under its own power anymore.”

“Why, I don’t mean to sound insensitive, but the kindest way to take care of that is a
shotgun to the head. Quick and painless for the animal.”

“Don’t own a shotgun or any gun for that matter.”
The druggist scoffed. “Don’t own a gun? In this town? If I were you, I go on over to Larry Smith’s and—”

“I’m not from here,” Tom interrupted. “Just passing through. And my wife loves that horse. She couldn’t stand for me executing it in that fashion. So, like I asked, what do you have for poison? You sell Thallium?”

“Well sir, Thallium wouldn’t kill much more than a rat. What you need for an animal of that size to do the job fast and to ensure death and not just make your horse sick is, well, I’d say the only thing I’d recommend is Prussian Blue,” the man said, left his post and went into the back room of his store. After a minute he reemerged carrying a six-ounce bottle with a cork top. “This here is basically just another form of cyanide.”

“And you can sell that?”

“Yes sir. They use it to mine silver nearby. For the zinc dust and whatnot. Now, I must warn you, this here is a very strong solution,” he said and pointed to the large warning label. “If you have any young ones about, I suggest you discard of it down a drain afterwards because—”

“Don’t have any children. Thanks for your concern just the same. How much?”

The druggist put the items in a paper bag, pushed up his spectacles, and punched in the keys on a paper-roll calculator. “That’ll be three-fifty.”

Tom laid a five-dollar bill on the counter. “Keep the rest for your kind service.”

“Hope all goes well with your horse. Always sad to see animal go.”

Tom touched the brim of his hat, thanked the man again, and exited the store. It was half past nine. On his way back over to the doctor’s house, he saw the train he’d hoped to catch to Omaha wasn’t stationed at the depot yet, giving him time enough for his errand. When he
reached Doctor Richmond’s house, he crept around the side of the house and peered in through a side window.

Inside was an empty, clean kitchen. In another window there was a sitting room for patients, also empty. In a crouched position along a well-manicured flowerbed, he listened for voices but heard none. He removed his handkerchief from his breast pocket and pressed it against the mouth of the ether bottle until it was soaked. The smell was pungent and some of it got on his hands. There was little he could do besides enter the house from the front door and he did so with a cautious quiet. He was careful not to fully close the screen door on the frame. After checking every first-floor room, he made his way up the carpeted steps. He opened three doors before finally finding the musician who was laid up much like a houseguest under a vibrant, handmade quilt.

Tom locked the door behind him and covered the musician’s nose and mouth with the ether rag. The man shot awake, struggled and gasped, flailed his hands and feet. His screams were muffled. Tom pressed the wet handkerchief down harder until the ether took effect and the man stopped moving. After he removed the cloth, he uncapped the Prussian Blue bottle and poured its contents down the musician’s throat in small portions, making sure it was fully ingested. Tom checked his mouth again, opening it wide with his fingers. He then pocketed both bottles and exited the doctor’s house as quickly as he’d entered it, seen by no one. In the street, he tossed the empty bottles and his soiled kerchief into a trash bin. He dipped his hands in a chilly horse trough, shaking them clean. Within the hour he was once again seated in a passenger cabin of 4-6-0 locomotive train, its boiler hissing steam on the way to Omaha.
Imagine: the year was 1909, early morning on the first day of July, the streets bright with rain from the previous night’s thunderstorm. All of Omaha sequined by sunlight on raindrops still clinging to windows and store signs. The office buildings were brick and mortar, the apartments were brownstones and clapboards, the hotels all pink marble and marquee overhangs, and the warehouses and rooftops nothing but cluttered real estate for advertisers and their new 24-sheet billboards, marking Omaha as a city of buyers and sellers: White Star Coffee, Blue Label Ketchup, Hamlin’s Wizard Oil for rheumatism and foot corns, Maypole Soaps, Rainer Beer.

The Leavenworth trolleys and O&CB streetcars zipped along their routes of overhead wires, carrying full loads of people to work. The air filled with a cacophony of wing tips hitting pavement, milk bottles clanking in pushcarts, the scrape of traffic braking at intersections and hissing back to acceleration, the sawing of a construction crew. Shop doors had opened for business--photography suppliers, confectioneries, the Brandeis department store where a person could by anything from a portable sewing machine to a pail of jelly.

Closer now:

The corner of 16th and Farnam. A clothier balanced a three-foot tower of hats for sale on his head. A women in a cocktail dress entered a syphilis clinic, last night’s thunderbolts not the only thing that shook the bedposts. A vendor in a cerise fez sold kettle corn from a popper drum, calling out: Hot corn! Get your hot corn here! A chocolate retriever lapped up gutter water streaming down from a roof pitch. Youngsters in wash suits and soap-lock haircuts played
stickball with broom handles in the street, using manhole covers as bases between the bouts of passing traffic before the sun was full out and the whole city purple with heat. Another advertisement for Mennen’s Toilet Powder--this one mobile and pasted on the side of a bulletin wagon--came to a halt at a sidewalk flag stop, the driver pausing to ignite a cigar after setting down the reigns. Drying linens garlanded fire escapes. Wash lines were hung between tenement windows, neighborhood laundry the flags of the alleys.

And even closer:

Tom Dennison--the man with the powder gray eyes and whimsical smile--seated at a shoeshine booth outside of Bram’s greengrocer. Netted bundles of tomatoes and apricots hung from U-shaped yokes outside the store windows already sweating like the glass of a hothouse in winter. Tom Dennison--dressed in a red plaid suit, a meerschaum pipe unlit but clenched between his teeth, bespectacled in steel frames, a coconut straw panama slanted on his head. He flipped a dime to a newsboy hawking the morning ink, keep the extra six cents for yourself young man, no thanks needed. Tom left the paper folded in his lap while a bootblack smeared carnauba wax on his two-toned Oxfords with the underside of a banana peel that worked better than even the best chamois cloth, a secret of the trade.

The early summer morning was already hotter than the devil’s elbow. A good day for the soda water stands on the corners or the shade of a green ash tree in the park. Tom sweat through his hat band as he chewed the fat with one of his many jitney attorneys whose tallest life ambition amounted to Small Claims Court Judge. This particular attorney--Finn O’Malley of the fourth ward who flip-flopped political parties as frequently as if his loyalty were something hot on a spatula--was a fat man in a vanilla-white suit with three chins who sucked on his cigar like an infant with a pacifier. Also outside the greengrocer: four off-duty Night Squad boys of
the okey-dokey variety doing whirligigs with their night sticks who held up the occasional out-of-town payroll truck and were waiting to give the Boss their final reports before heading home between shifts. But Tom was in no mood to be interrupted, jawing heavy at the fat attorney now, really giving him the pretty business, his mouth working his words like paste and gesturing with his folded newspaper, in the middle of saying to Finn:

“…how is it you supposed kings of commerce don’t even know what’s happening in your own organization? The next time you want a good spanking take it down at The Berryman and not in a goddamn caucus room. Yeah, you and that Louie Blue, you two are as a chummy as a couple of brother elks putting on your secret little rump conventions and keeping elected delegates standing out in the damn rain, but Louie, he is all through.”

“Louie Black, not Louie Blue,” Finn replied, staring down at the new shine on his oxbloods.

“Well, gee woops, Finn. Like I give a sweet one what color his name is. Man’s the head of the automobile license office and you’re acting like he’s the god of all thunder.”

“He’s the director of traffic,” the attorney corrected Tom again. Nothing like a little morning chitchat from a man who made his salary on the proclivity of his tongue and the gas in his lungs.

“Yeah, all those illegal taxi cab stands are just what’s ailing this city.”

“Louie’s got a lot more bad soap on the mayor than that. And he’s got the right friends.”

The man in question--Louie Black--was one of the lone Republicans still in office after the near Democratic sweep of the city three years earlier. He had proposed the possibility for a special election to recall Mayor James Dahlman at last night’s Omaha Business Men Association’s meeting. Over the past month, sixty-thousand people had signed a secret recall
petition that cited ten reasons for Dahlman to be ousted from city hall, chief among them being his firing of the police commissioner J.J. Donahue after he conducted a series of raids on gambling houses and harems throughout Tom’s third ward.

“What does this Mr. Black really want?” Tom asked.

“A Republican in the mayor’s office.”

“For himself, I mean.”

Finn licked his lips. “Something more than director of traffic, I’d wager.”

“Every tail-ender in this city and their goddamn aspirations. It’s an illness, you know? Never being satisfied with what you have.”

“Well, Louie’s got the right acumen. And the right friends.”

Tom fanned himself with the newspaper. “That you said already. Louie and all his carpet bag chums. But what about you? You’re figurein’ he’s fitted for something bigger, too, are you? Sixteen out of seventeen votes supporting this goddamn recall and that’s among friends with all your money in their pockets? Boy, you and Louie got the right friends all right.”

Finn pointed at himself with his thumb. “You should know that one vote against was mine, square off.”

“Glad to know it.”

“Louie’s a turncoat. Nothing I can do about that.”

“Wrong. He’s just a Republican doing Republican things. But you and all the rest of those OBMA boys? The retail men and the real estate operators and all your other fat brothers of the bar? What about them?”

“Suppose I do owe you an explanation.”
“You owe me a lot more than that. You and your pals had a great laugh last night but here you are still joking while we’re getting harpooned and now we’re in for a battle when blocking this recall vote should’ve been as easy as a slice. You want a nice little courtroom to call your own one day but you’re too fat to squeeze your ass into that chair,” Tom said and slapped the attorney on his gut, “and I’m supposed to fit you behind a bench? Those things ain’t as spacious as the ones in the park, I hope you know. And something else you should know is that you don’t lose weight by cutting the crusts off your egg salad sandwiches and you don’t sway an entire nonpartisan committee by patting a few backs. You buy them with payrolls or you break them with shakedowns.”

“There’s no need for insults.”

“But an education, maybe?”

“What do I have you for?”

“To sit here and tell you you’re walking down your own plank after you cut the lumber yourself.” Tom handed a pair of bills--a dollar for the shine, a dollar for the tip--to the bootblack, a young colored man in a white tuxedo coat. “I ain’t even had my morning banana yet and already you got me in an epigrammatic mood.”

Finn remained seated in his sidewalk chair while Tom stood and straightened his jacket.

“What do you want me to do about Louie?” he asked.

“Run him for Governor, whaddya think?” Tom said and lit the boat of his pipe with two matches. “He ain’t your problem anymore. Now he’s mine and you made him mine. I don’t want it, but I got it and I’m gonna cure that bozo before this petition goes any further. But if they go public with this recall, if one word of this finds the print page, you better hope you got at least
three more years left in your ticker--whale blubber and all--because that’s how long it’s gonna be before you get another chance to bang the gavel, if ever.”

The attorney, sweating through his shirt above the belt, took his half-smoked panatela out of his mouth for a moment as if he were about to say something but then replaced it between his teeth.

“I’m glad to see all this heat hasn’t dulled your appetite at least,” Tom said.

Finn raised an eyebrow.

Tom reached out and touched the lapel of Finn’s white suit coat. “You got catsup on your jacket.”

“I had a frankfurter,” Finn said after glancing at the stain.

“A frankfurter for breakfast,” Tom murmured, shook his head, and walked away down the sidewalk without a goodbye, stepping through a run-off of water as Mr. Bram, owner of the greengrocer, was spraying down the pavement in front of his shop with a rubber hose. Tom tipped his hat hello to the man--next month’s rent better not be late this time, old Bram-- and walked to the corner of Farnam. His driver Harry Buford, negro chauffer by day and North Omaha police lieutenant by night, was waiting behind the wheel of an apple-red Columbia touring car.

Tom entered the backseat with an exhausted sigh and Buford greeted his boss with his usual, “Howsa doing this morning, Mr. Tom?”

Tom sank down against the leather, stared at the wooden dashboard gleaming with gauges, took off his newly buffed Oxfords, and put his stockinged feet up on the seat in front of him. “About as well as I’d expected.”
“You look a might ragged, boss. Anything good come of it last night?” Buford asked as he nosed the Columbia into the flow of traffic, his buckskin-gloved hands made for the smooth handling of a wheel.

“City’s going to hell in a hand basket and it’s being delivered to the fire by the same apple-knocking-sons-of-bitches who are promising heaven,” Tom replied. The morning traffic momentarily bottlenecked into a standstill--laundry coupes, a truckload of hogs, tin lizzies, a wooden-paneled produce wagon packed with dusty watermelons.

“Some folk just don’t know what’s good for ‘em,” Buford said and put his foot to the accelerator again.

“And they won’t know it till they get a load of the bad and all hellzapoppin and it’s too late. That’s just the way it is in politics,” Tom said. The smell of gasoline fumes settled down along with coming hot brightness of new Midwestern summer day that would see American flags drooping from their poles like wet laundry on a clothesline in the breezeless humidity.

And such was the routine business of yet another Monday morning in the City on the Plains for Tom Dennison as he ordered his breakfast at Gilliam’s Luncheonette after his visit with the attorney, stirring his pale coffee with the handle of his fork. The waitress appeared quicker than you can count to two--pen and paper tablet in hand though she was well aware of Tom’s daily order: a banana sliced into a bowl of milk and two eggs sunny-side for him, pigs-in-a-blanket and a glass of tomato juice for Harry. The boss and his driver eating together every weekday morning for the last two years without fail, a piece of calm before the tattering of the daily docket.

Sitting back against the booth, Tom finally opened the morning paper he bought at the shoeshine stand. He didn’t have to look long at page one for the day’s lead story to ruin his meal.
Scooping up his briefcase and leaving his eggs unfinished--the rest of his morning appointments now looking like they would have to be afternoon appointments--he asked Harry to take him to the Bee Building.

The headline of *The Omaha Bee* read: “Victor Rosewater Succeeds Father as Managing Editor.”

* * *

By nine o’clock, over four-thousand copies had already been sold--a new early morning record for the paper even including its heyday in the mid-1890s. As the first editions circulated around town, the reason for its popularity wasn’t in the headline itself, but what it implied: Edward Rosewater--the paper’s editor-in-chief--was dead or, at least, near death. On every street corner, a passel of white pages were held open as anxious readers scanned the lines of the article for some tidbit about the passing of the former newspaper giant. Yet the short few paragraphs of the story offered no such information.

It was no secret that Edward’s sojourn to Arizona for the last four years was due to his declining health. In the spring of 1903, at the age of sixty-one, he came down with tuberculosis, coughing up blood into a rag until his lungs felt like they’d been scraped out with a horn spoon. In one last attempt to restore his health, Edward and his wife left Omaha on a train bound for the heat of Arizona. Now, after four years, Rosewater and his wife had still not returned and, reading between the lines of the morning’s headline, if he ever did return it would be in the back of a glass-door hearse surrounded by the stink of sympathy flowers. Rumor had it Edward’s son,
Victor, thirty-years old and married with two children of his own, was to succeed him as editor of *The Bee*.

In Edward’s absence, *The Bee* had all but faded to obscurity. In fact, during the last two years and for the first time since 1863, Omaha’s population did not include a Rosewater at all; Edward’s son Victor--only recently moved back to the city himself-- had been away at Columbia University earning his PhD in journalism where he worked as the staff director for the campus newspaper, *The Columbia Daily Spectator*.

On the sidewalk outside the front doors of the Bee Building, a large fedora-hatted crowd had gathered, awaiting a further announcement about Edward’s death. As Tom shouldered his way through the assembly, led by Buford who parted a path for him, he overheard all the speculative mumblings: *Did he die in Arizona? Will his body be brought back to Omaha? When is the funeral?* At first he was not allowed inside by a pair of doormen but was eventually granted access after they phoned upstairs and informed Victor that Mr. Dennison requested a word with him.

As Tom entered the office he saw the physical changes of the paper’s new leadership. The previous black-and-yellow wallpaper was being stripped and repainted by men in white coveralls. Edward’s other bee paraphernalia--amateur paintings of honey pots and hives, golden drapery, beeswax candles, a tabletop torch shaped like a honeycomb--was packed up in boxes. The giant desk in the center of the room was covered in a tarp and the windows were blocked out with temporary drapes.

After a moment, Victor--short and stooped like his father with black moustahces, a shiny nose and a face cratered by smallpox pittings--emerged from the adjacent office bathroom
wearing a dark suit and white waistcoat. He greeted Tom with a hearty handshake. “Mr. Dennison, it’s been a long time. I was hoping you might come by today. Please, sit.”

“Where?” Tom said and looked to the covered furniture.


“Thanks, but no.” Tom paused, unsure of how to bring up the issue of Victor’s father without being too forward. “I see you don’t share your pop’s affinity for interior design. What’s with the fire sale?”

“There’s a lot of things I don’t share with him, but most of them are superficial. This office was an eyesore and I never liked ‘The Bee’ as a name. From now on, I plan to call the paper ‘The Metropolitan’.”

“You mean ‘The Omaha Metropolitan’?”

Victor shook his head and, from a liquor tray on the only table not blanketed in a drip cloth, poured himself a breakfast glass of brandy. “No, I don’t. I have a vision for this paper that goes beyond local rabble-rousing. One thing I learned during my time out east is that any real city publishes a periodical of national relevance. New York has ‘The Times’. Washington has ‘The Post’. Chicago, ‘The Tribune’. Even Kansas City has ‘The Star’ and surely this town is on the level with that whistle-stop.”

“Those names are abbreviations,” Tom said.

“Come again?” Victor asked.

“Forget it,” Tom said and shook a handful of peppermints he kept in his left trouser pocket. “Speaking of, how was old New York? Cornell, right?”

“Columbia.”
“So it’s Dr. Rosewater now? That’s some achievement.”

“And I plan to put my education to good use. My father built this city with his words, I aim to put it on the map with mine.”

Tom gestured with his hat in his hand. “It’s good for a man to have an ambition. But, speaking of your father--”

“Yes?” Victor shook his glass, rattling ice.

“I don’t want to sound insensitive, and maybe you haven’t noticed, but there’s a large crowd waiting outside and--” Tom said but, before he could finish his sentence, Edward Rosewater entered the office dressed in a brown pinstripe suit with pearl buttons on the pant seams and a boat hat with a white band.

“A good crowd is just what we’ve been hoping to rustle up, old friend,” Edward said and approached Tom with a beaming smile, his hand outstretched. A tailor followed him with a ribbon of measuring tape draped around his neck, a pair of pinking shears in his shirt pocket, and a pencil clenched sideways in his mouth.

Tom stammered. The old tycoon wasn’t only still alive and upright, but in high spirits and apparently full of healthy vigor. The two men shook hands for the first time in nearly half a decade, Edward wearing a contented grin like a cat who just swallowed a canary after pawing it out of its brass cage, and Tom letting out a brief chuckle that suggested somebody had been or soon would be decorated with the ancient and uncomfortable order of the double cross.

* * *
When Tom first arrived in the city from Colorado during that equally hot summer of 1892, Omaha had three daily newspapers: *The Herald, The Republican* and *The Bee*. More than a rivalry for readership, each paper harbored a personal hatred for the other two. When not reporting on runaway livestock or drunken tomfoolery or grasshopper season, they often generated their own headlines by dishing out slurs against one another, inking claret all over their pages.

The man who summoned Tom from Colorado--Edward Rosewater, founder and editor of *The Bee*--was known for his short height and even shorter fuse. More often than not, he was the flint that sparked the verbal fires. Twice such printed banter spilled out into the streets. The first confrontation, witnessed by more than a hundred onlookers on the corner of 12th and Harney, saw Edward victorious as he belted Ambrose Balcome--editor of *The Republican*--with a cowhide whip until his face was lacerated to the bone. The matter in question began as a simple disagreement over interracial marriage licenses and soon escalated to *The Republican* calling Rosewater’s wife a “wench” in their Sunday edition.

The second brawl nearly ended Edward’s life. A week after running an article slamming a local blacksmith--Richard Curry--whose bay mare kicked the knee cap clean off a young boy, Mr. Curry tracked Rosewater down in front of a book bindery. Curry was accompanied by a 250-pound man whose name was never discovered. Together, in broad daylight, they backed Edward into an alley and, with his giant friend holding down the much smaller Rosewater, Curry beat him repeatedly with a lead-loaded slingshot for running his business’s name into the mud.

Edward’s limp body, barely holding onto life, wasn’t found until several hours later. He was rushed to a drugstore and given first aid for his injuries: bruises that swelled up as juicy as hunks of fruit, three broken ribs, missing teeth, and a fractured jaw. He’d lost a considerable
amount of blood, nearly all the hair on his head and, for three days, the prognosis for his survival was grim. Yet, three weeks later, with uniformed police officers guarding his home day and night, Edward made a miraculous recovery. His hair never grew back and, from that point on, he carried a .38 caliber pistol at all times, but the sharpness of his editorials didn’t lose their edge; in fact, they grew dicier.

The building that housed The Bee was located at 17th and Farnam. At the time, in those few short years before the turn of the twentieth century, The Bee laid claim to the country’s largest printing presses--even bigger than the New York papers. Simply called The Bee Building, it stood seven stories tall and was constructed from red granite. On the outside, Edward adorned the turrets with giant faux beehives carved from mango wood. The paper’s motto, “Industry, Frugality, and Service,” was etched in white stone above its looming, boxed-glass doors.

Edward possessed none of those three qualities his newspaper bore as its slogan. Standing barely five foot three inches, he had a paintbrush moustache, mouse-squeak voice, and almost no fistic skill to back his serpentine tongue. Compulsively clad in striped windowpane trousers and colorfully patterned vests, he was, above all, a sensationalist. Often, as part of his showboat patriotism, his clothing was stitched in model of the American flag. Born in Bohemia to Jewish parents and immigrating to the States at the age of nine, he fought for the Union forces in the Civil War. While working as telegraph dispatcher for Western Union, he was famously handed a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, signed by President Lincoln himself, to be put over the wire--a factoid he was fond of regaling to anyone who would listen to the tale.

On the morning of Tom’s arrival--May 21, 1892--he exited the train and took a Hansom cab to meet the man who’d requested his talents.
When Tom reached the Bee Building, he spoke with a receptionist, took the stairs to the top floor, knocked on Edward’s private office door and was beckoned inside with a hearty, “Come in, come in.”

The man who’d called out to him was standing in front of a mirror in his long underwear, shaving with a straight razor over a wall sink, his face lathered in cream.

“Pardon me,” Tom said, looking away towards the opposite wall. “Believe I’ve interrupted you during your dress. Do you know where I can find a Mr. Edward Rosewater?”

The man turned, a wide smile on his creamy face. “Why, son, you’ve found him. I’ve already told you once, come in. Don’t just stand there in the doorway like some transit thief. Take a seat. I won’t be long.”

Tom walked over to the man and extended his hand. “Mr. Rosewater, a pleasure. I’m Thomas Denn--”

“Oh yes, I know who you are. Been expecting you. You’re a couple days late.”

“Had myself a little trouble along the way.”

“Oh? I hope nothing too grave,” Edward said, slicing off the excess foam from the underside of his neck and rinsing the blade under the faucet.

“Nothing more than a slight inconvenience. Regardless, I apologize for my tardiness.”

Edward tapped his razor on the porcelain and wiped it on a towel. “Nonsense, dear boy. Your timing is actually quite apt. Big to-dos a brewing.”

Tom took a seat in a leather granddaddy armchair across from a black walnut desk scattered with papers in disarray, a pewter inkwell, and fountain pens standing upright in a mother-of-pearl base. In a giant wire cage hanging over the desk, two hummingbirds flew in rapid circles.
“A little late to be starting out the day for a man with as much pending business as yourself then, wouldn’t you say?” Tom asked.

“Starting? I’ve been up since yesterday. I never start, nor stop. It’s all just one long string of events. But if I don’t shave twice a day, I get mud all over my face,” he said and dried his cheeks. In front of another mirror, this one much taller and quite narrow, he pulled on his flamboyant trousers and candy-red suspenders.

“This is a handsome building.”

Edward concentrated on knotting his thistle-ended bow tie. “Sure enough. I grew up on this very lot. Used to be my childhood home back when all this was just farmland. But it’s a promising town. Twenty years ago the roads were all prairie grass and stamped-down mud. Now they’re paved with flagstone and brick. They used to lay ties across the Missouri when it froze in the winter so trains could get across from Iowa. Now we have seven different railways that come to a head here, bringing immigrants of all stock to and fro everyday. Swedes, Greeks, folks from the British Isles, Italians. In another decade, this place will rival Chicago for pure class and economy. Mark my words.”

Tom leaned forward in his chair. “And you needed me to come all this way for some kind of brawn? Surely you could just as easily find that kind of meat here.”

“Is that what you really think I had you ride the rails five hundred miles for? Any dumb lout with a heavy hand could fit that service.” Edward turned after shrugging on his jacket and spread his arms. “I’m fifty-one years old and I need someone of your spirit and youth to take under my wing. Politics go to hell if you can’t surround yourself with like-minded people of a certain weight. Take you and I, for example. We’re both stout republicans. We both came up from the lower ranks as sporting men. We both possess persuasive skills that can induce people
to a vacillating turn of mind in our favor. We’re both pragmatists, yet we dream of grander things. Don’t think I brought you out here, sight unseen, without getting a full report on your résumé.”

“I hear you have a son, Victor.”

Edward waved off Tom’s notion and, fully dressed, took a seat behind his desk. “Victor’s a charlatan. A good boy. But too good, if you get my meaning. Oh, I’m sure he’ll make a fine newspaperman and I plan to pass The Bee onto him in due time, but, like I said, if I wanted a journalist or a pair of biceps, I wouldn’t have searched high and low for someone beyond the city. You’re new blood, Tom. This town is shoulders-full of men who talk about action but rarely take it. What I’m talking about is an empire.”

“Fashioning yourself a miniature Rome in middle America?”

“And it won’t take long, either. Stick to me.” Edward reached for a glass decanter across his desk. “But you’ve had a long trip. And some of this business will make itself clear in due time. Can I offer you a drink?”

Tom raised his hand. “Thanks much, but no. I like to keep my wits about me.”

Rosewater replaced the bulb top. “Of course. Bravo,” he said, stood, and touched Tom on the shoulder. “It’s a gorgeous day. Let’s get out of this office and enjoy the spring air. I’m sure you’re anxious to get an eye full of this city for yourself. Plus, there are a few things I very much want to show you.”
Together they walked through lower downtown during its mid-morning frenzy. At every juncture along the way, Edward was happy to rhapsodize about the many prominent sights, explaining it all to Tom in the fashion of a tour guide.

Omaha was in the middle of a population boom. In the last decade alone the census had risen from an estimated forty-thousand inhabitants to nearly triple that number. As Tom passed through the main downtown district, he saw a scene completely different from the Colorado towns in which he’d risen to a small fame. Many of the streets were being lowered in a regrading project to make flatter surfaces for an electric streetcar company, some of them by fifteen feet or more. Numerous frame houses were isolated on tall hillocks as new street ways were cut deep into the ground. Wooden retaining walls held back huge amounts of old earth. Ladders were used as means to get to many front lawns.

Chickens and hogs walked the same streets as men dressed in silk suits. Curb performers-puppeteers and organ grinders--played their shows next to bollard lampposts greened with rain rust. Street vendors in porkpie hats sold watermelons from wheeled carts, oranges bulging in netted socks. Swirling-poled barbershops advertised such medical quackery as bloodletting (leeches kept in three inches of silt water in the bottom of a mop bucket) and painless tooth removal (screams muffled in a room padded with mattresses along the walls). Drunkards sat outside on box crates next to children blowing soap bubbles from toy pipes. Rising industry was everywhere: fabric warehouses, ritzy hotels with vertical façades, flat bottom ferries ushering people across the brown Missouri, vaudeville theatres, zither clubs and pawn shops that doubled as high interest rate loan brokers, and ten-floor department stores.
As the two men made their way down Harney Street, looking east towards the river, Edward gyrated his hand in all directions, outlining an area he referred to as the immigrant campgrounds:

“All the way from here down to the waterfront, then back to Cass Street and south to Jackson and back to the river again, why, this nearly twenty square blocks of pure potential. And that’s just the start. Then you have the ethnic enclaves. There’s Little Italy running roughshod to the north, claiming their old country ties like they’re the sole inheritors of crime but are really just a bunch stool pigeons who run to the police faster than women in bonnets. You’ve got the Croatians out in Goose Hallow. They’re a crazy lot. They raise geese inside their homes and even sleep with them in their beds. Hence the name. Beyond that there’s Miracle Square and Sheely Town. That’s the Poles who’ve come to work the stockyards. The Scandinavians and Russians are scattered about all over like a deck of blown cards. Not to mention Bohemian Town and the negroes who toil on the railroads and sleep in tents. There’s Pioneer Block down along the riverbank and the river ward’s mainly eastern European Jews.”

Tom spat on the lowered sidewalk. Across the way, down in the bottom of one of the city’s newly excavated streets, he watched men haul wheelbarrows full of dirt to and from the back of a wagon. “An impressive hodgepodge.”

“Precisely. More to the point, it’s fragmentation. Every group and creed staking out their own neighborhoods, divvying up the city like slices of shoofly pie. Now, take a look across the street.” Edward pointed to a gathering of townspeople on the far sidewalk in front of a steam bakery with cracked windows: a young boy hobbled about in cardboard-soled shoes, a pregnant woman wore a tight blouse that flashed her belly like muscle, two elderly men rolled dice out of a soup can onto a checkered board.
“What do you see?” Edward asked.

Tom did not respond.

“Need. In every sector of this city, people are in need of services they can’t obtain for themselves, be it jobs, contracts for city services or business licenses, medical care, protection either from or by the police, bail, loans, or simply someone they can turn to for help when the chips are down.”

“I get the feeling you’re not talking about setting up a charity.”

Edward put his hand on Tom’s back. “Actually, yes. A different kind of charity. I’m talking about services and favors doled out in return for allegiance to our cause.”

“And what exactly is ‘our cause’?” Tom asked, cramming a hand in his pant pocket and retrieving a pouch of Cavendish tobacco for his briar pipe.

“Do I need to spell it out for you? Or are you just being obtuse?”

Tom filled the bowl of his pipe with a pinch of leaves, got a smoke rolling, and crossed his arms. “Let me tell you a little something about myself that you didn’t hear from your friend Fred over some telegraph wire. My folks were both poor Irish Catholic farmers. We moved all over when I was young. I had seven brothers and sisters. When one of us got sick, they made us eat grass and sleep under blankets in the back of our wagon. When our house burnt down, they split us up and sent us off to live with aunts and cousins. Haven’t heard word one from any of them since. My mother died before she turned forty. My father used to shuck corn and he wasn’t far behind her to the grave. One time I went so long without food that when I had a slice of white bread again it tasted like cake. Perhaps I am obtuse. But maybe you’ve spent so many years wearing a cravat and looking down over the world from your beehive you’ve forgotten the only cause worth calling a cause is making money.”
Edward grinned. “I knew as soon as I saw you walk through my door you were the right man for the job. Look again at those people over there. That boy without shoes, he’s one of your brothers. The young pregnant woman, your mother. Do you see what I’m saying? I don’t care if a man has got deep pockets or if he is a pickpocket. If they need our help, we’ll give it to them. And before long, folks will be seeking us out, eager to pledge their devotion in return for our good services. Surely you can see the money in that.”

* * *

As they turned west on 13th Street, short machine shops and packing houses gave way to tall government buildings with Corinthian columns and cathedrals with sun-blanced spires. Just as quickly the general populous transformed as well. Freight haulers and ranch hands changed to businessmen and rectors dressed in double-breasted frock coats despite the spring heat. Many smoked gold-papered cigarettes in ivory quellazaires. A man walked a Danish pointer outfitted in yarn taffeta. A woman wearing knickerbockers rode a penny-farthing bicycle. Young hackberry trees, their bark as white as sucked-down candies, were guarded around their trunks with individual wrought iron fencing.

Not far down the path--at 1313 Douglas Street--Tom and Edward entered a two-story, Victorian-style building. Tom searched for a name of the establishment but saw none. The parlor room was dimly lit and decorated in the comforts of a country house: lacy window drapes, fleur-de-lis wallpaper, an alcohol-fed pressure stove. A long bar counter ran along the left side of the room, stacked with cordials and corn whiskeys and oak cask barrels. Skylights illuminated the dust motes in the air. The smell of sawed wood was covered with a heavy jasmine perfume. In
the farthest corner of the room, three wasp-waisted and peach-skinned women in trumpeted skirts loitered around an upright cabinet piano. It being only the lunch hour, there were as of yet no patrons.

Tom and Edward were immediately greeted by the proprietor, a woman whose form was shaped by an hourglass corset and ribbed bodice under a pastel tea gown. Though older in age--to Tom she appeared nearly fifty with her putty-colored hair and wrinkled smile--she still bore a rare beauty that he often saw in women painted on cigar boxes but hardly in everyday life.

“Oh, Eddy,” she said in her sing-song voice. “I’ve been expecting a visit from you all week. Where have you been?”

Edward took her gloved hand and kissed it lightly. “Madam Anna, I would like you to meet Mr. Thomas Dennison. He has come all the way from Colorado and we’ll be seeing to some of our business here.”

“Of course. Anna Wilson,” she said and extended her hand to Tom. “Welcome to Omaha. I hope you find our city to your liking.”

Tom bent his lips to Anna’s hand. “Rather, I hope more that Omaha finds me to its liking.”

“I’m sure Eddy has already given you his version of the dime tour.”

“A wonderful city.”

“If he wasn’t such a hard head for his newspaper, I’m certain he would make a fine lobbygow.”

Edward gritted his teeth. “Are you complementing me on my cordial nature?”

“That I am,” Anna said. “Well, I’m sure you gentleman are in need of a drink.”

“Just water for me, thank you please,” Tom said, wiping his neck.
“And for me as well,” Edward echoed. “Anna, I think it best to cut right to the chase and show Tom around a bit, seeing as how he will be spending a great deal of his time here for the foreseeable future.”

“In a cathouse?” Tom whispered to Edward.

“Ah, more sightseeing,” Anna said loudly before Tom could finish. Then, with the flick of a finger, she beckoned him to follow her to the backroom. “There isn’t much to show. Ours is a modest operation. But if you see anything you like, you need only say the word.”

Edward remained in the main parlor where he struck up a conversation with one of the women standing next to the bench piano. Tom accompanied Anna behind a bamboo-beaded doorway. There he saw a scene much more familiar to him from his recent mining town lodgings: two oval-shaped faro tables covered in green baize, a snooker table littered with bright billiards balls, cue sticks lined up on a vertical rack, a bank of glowing slot machines, a twenty-foot double roulette wheel, a policy wheel game with rubber tubes and a large chalkboard slate scoring the previous day’s winning numbers. Like the front parlor, the gambling den was also empty save for a lone blackjack dealer shuffling cards, exercising his fingers.

“I thought gambling was illegal in Nebraska.”

“For some it is. For others it isn’t,” Anna said.

“This doesn’t appear to be modest at all. It’s quite grand, actually.”

“Don’t let yourself get too impressed. We’ve only just begun.”

“Not much business yet today?” he asked.

Anna laughed. “We’re not officially open until sundown. Actually, we’re never officially open.”

“What’s the name of this place?”
“We don’t have one of those, either. Most of the girls just call it ‘The Thirteen’.”

“Because of the address?”

“You’re a sharp sprout. I can see why Edward fawns over you. You’re not a star, are you?”

“Police? Of course not,” Tom said as they continued down to the basement through a narrow brick staircase. It was drab and unfinished. The hallways, carved out of dirt much like the newly lowered streets and barely wide enough to fit a single person through, were lined with hanging lanterns. Wooden beams and cross-sections of welded pipe held up the wormy length of the structure, not unlike that of the many mine shafts Tom had burrowed through in Colorado. The low ceilings forced him to bow his head, as if he were exploring a cavern. The heat was nearly unbearable. A series of small sleeping barracks--each only big enough to contain a single bed--were guarded with cast iron doors that each bore a painted number.

“I take it these are not the entertainment rooms,” he said.

“You are a funny one. These are the cribs for our girls,” Anna said. “There’s no glamour in it, but it’s safe and cheap.”

“No need explaining, ma’am,” Tom said. “I understand.”

At the end of the corridor, another long tunnel led to a separate set of wooden stairs. Anna said, “That’s a side entrance that goes out to a alley. Some of our most valued patrons, men of a certain stature, like to have this access to the building instead of going through the front door.”

“Of course,” Tom replied as they backtracked and resurfaced to the main level.

“Would you like to view the upstairs?”
“I believe I could pass on that. I’ve seen my share of rental rooms. Sure enough they’re all the same. Truth be told, I’m gill full of show-and-tell for the day.”

“Well, only one more thing to see. And I think you won’t mind this showing.”

Tom was then escorted into another room adjacent to the gambling den, behind a beer cooler. Anna unlocked the thick oak door with a key tied to a plain silver necklace that hung down into her bosom.

“What did you do in Colorado? That is, if you aren’t offended by my asking.”

“Oh, a whole smear of things. And not just Colorado, either. I was in Utah for a spell. And Wyoming and Montana. For a time I was as far west as San Diego. Suppose my work history is a bit sordid. Really, I’m a nomad.”

“Well, consider yourself a nomad no longer,” Anna said as they both filed into the room. In the center was a large cherry oak desk, clean of clutter except for a tweed fabric suitcase. The walls, freshly painted, were bare with a single window. The temperature--due to the proximity of the nearby beer cooler--was more than comfortable, especially when compared to the heat outside and below in the sleeping rooms. An empty bookcase and a black metal strongbox stood against the back wall.

“This is your new bureau,” Anna said.

“It’s no Oval Office,” Edward added, shuffling through door behind them. “But I think you will find it has many ancillary benefits. Why don’t you take a look in that suitcase?”

Two uniformed police officers wearing bell-shaped Keystone caps, collared navy-blue jackets, eight-point star badges, and service belts holstering wooden batons stood behind him in the doorway. Both were no older than thirty and clean shaven with lissome physiques.
Tom paused upon seeing the policemen. He bowed his head in a sign of farewell and began to make his way out of the room. “Well, thanks so much for the opportunity, Mr. Rosewater. However, I don’t think I am the man for this position.”

Edward held out a hand to stop his progress. “Hold your horses. Tom, this is Jack Brewning and Alan York. Don’t be alarmed. They’re good fellows. Known them both since they were children. They work for me. For us.”

“Listen, I’m still not real certain of what it is you want from me. You’ve done a great deal of talking but not much of this is making any sense.”

“Go on and take a look-see in that satchel,” Edward said. “See if things don’t clear up a smidge.”

“Right. And then as soon as I do both of these boys will have me in manacles.”

Edward approached the desk, flipped open both of the suitcases’ fastening brackets and popped the lid. Tom stared at its contents: banded stacks of dark pink, 500-dollar banknotes.

“What is this?”

“What does it look like?” Edward smiled, picked up a stack, and fanned through it with his fingers. “This here is seventy-five thousand dollars.”

Tom once again considered the two police officers. “Well that makes all the difference, now that everything has cleared itself up.”

“Don’t be snippy. Especially since this money is yours. It’s favor money to be distributed as you see fit. You can keep it locked up in that safe. Enter in your own combination that I won’t even know. Hell, use some of this for yourself. Get a couple new suits. Treat yourself to a night out on the town.”
“This here is ten times more than most men will ever see in their whole lives if they lived to be two hundred years old.”

“Which is why most men will be coming to us for help. Do a bit of gambling to mix with these fellas and get to know the folks who come in here. Let them all understand they can turn to us. Tell them to tell their friends. Word of mouth in this town spreads quicker than a prairie fire. I’ll handle all the upper-world boys, you just see to it that the everyday folk are being taken care of. Ensure we have their votes come election day.”

“You buying yourself government positions?”

“No, no, Tom. Not buying. Earning. There is a difference.”

“And who’s to stop me from just taking this all for myself and skipping town tomorrow that much the richer?”

“No one. If you really believe that’s in your best interest, by all means. But where this came from is only the start. I hope you are understanding me. Stick around long enough and this will seem like piggy bank pennies in comparison that what can be earned down the line.”

“That’s a lot of faith to put into someone you’ve hardly just met.”

“And you’ll earn it back, too.”

“The money or the trust?”

“Which do you think is more valuable? Also, if you need any kind of work done in the city that our boys here can help perform,” Edward said as he motioned to the two police officers, “just give them their daily marching orders.”

“At a price,” Alan, the larger of the two crushers, said in his cockney accent.
“Of course. When have you not been paid rightly for your service?” Edward peeled off two bills from a stack and handed one to each of the officers. “There’s my gratitude for you both just showing up today. Now, if Tom here comes calling for you, it’d be wise to listen.”

Alan shoved his bill inside his jacket pocket. Jack placed his under his hat.

“Thank you, boys,” Edward said to them. “That’ll be all.”

After they exited the room, Anna followed suit and shut the door behind her. Alone again, Edward, straightening his bow tie, said to Tom, “I know this is all happening might fast, but like I said before, I am a man of action. Patience is hardly a virtue. But don’t you worry. You will be up to speed before you know it.”

* * *

Speed. Speed ahead fifteen years, once again in the top-floor office of the Bee Building with Edward Rosewater holding out his arms so his tailor could measure the width of his chest, and saying to Tom: “Thought I was good and dead, did you? I’m as healthy as a horse and ready for a race.”

Tom searched for words. “A race? What of your illness?”

“A few years in the desert dried it out of me. I feel better now than I did at forty. And it seems that today’s headline proves this city still remembers me. Which is why I’m glad you come by.”

“Yet you’re giving up your paper to Victor here?”

Edward looked at his reflection in a hand mirror held by the tailor. A paper bib was tucked into his shirt collar, his face recently powdered. Satisfied with his cosmetically enhanced
complexion, he excused his clothier with a wave of his hand, removed the bib and crunched it into a ball. “It’s time for a change. For all of us. I don’t know if you know this, but Victor here was born the same year I started *The Bee*. Barring the last few years, I’ve been in charge of this paper for nearly three decades. That’s a long time to be doing any one thing, even if it’s something you love. Life is too short to only play one trick.”

“I think you’ve played your fair share of tricks in this life, Ed,” Tom said.

“Come, let’s let bygones be bygones,” Edward replied and patted Tom on the shoulder. “I wanted you to be the first to know, I’m running for Senator.”

Tom rubbed his neck. “Senator? That’s two years away. You think you have the health to last that long? Most people in this city think you’re dead and it seems a good number of them are excited about it.”

“Including yourself?”

“I don’t believe in ghosts, if that’s what you’re asking. But you’re fool to think just because a little time has passed that everything is jake between us.”

Edward sighed. “Do you remember the first time we met? Do you remember what you said? The only cause worth calling a cause was making money? Well, I don’t know if you’re still of that mind, but if you are I have a proposition for you.”

“This is all eerily familiar. Only this time I’m not some straw man fresh off the train from Colorado and this time I’ve plenty of money. My own money.”

“That you do. What you don’t have, however, is a friend on the state level.” Edward paused. “So, how would you like to be my campaign manager?”

“Campaign manager? For the senate? What the hell do you need one of those for? What you need is a telephone directory and a trough of cash.”
“Loosely speaking, of course. I need somebody to help me grease the palms of our boys up on the hill. You know, somebody that can help me schmooze the bureaucrats.”

“You mean scare them.”

“So long as it’s smooth.”

Tom sat down in a tarp-covered chair. “Just like that, huh? Quick as a wink and we’re chums again, are we?”

“Listen, I have good reason to be vindictive towards you, too. You ran Dahlman for mayor without letting me on, a goddamn Democrat no less. You went behind my back with all the boys down at the Jacksonian and you nearly ran this paper into bankruptcy because you hold onto a grudge longer than most women. Blow for blow, you’re just as louche as me.”

“I reacted to what you acted on first. That’s a big difference.”

“We have more to gain from alliance than hatred.”

Tom cleared his throat. “Say we do. Say we shake this out and I help you win your senate seat only to find you’re still the same bait-and-switch swell head you’ve always been, well, let me tell you, I don’t care if I have to walk barefoot to Washington and break into the capitol building to give you the full choke.”

“Isn’t he a card?” Edward said to his son with a chuckle. He then turned to Tom with more seriousness. “Look, I know you’re no patsy. Truth be told, I’m frightened of you. So’s the whole damn city. Which is why I want you on my team. What do you say?”

“I got more pressing concerns at the moment,” Tom said.

“Like the OBMA’s move against the mayor?”

“How did you know about that?”

“I’ve been away, Tom. Not dead.”
“Right. Every Midwestern whisper traveling all the way to the Arizona desert.” Tom paused. “But since you seem to be in the know, what’s your position?”

“On the mayor? I haven’t decided yet. I’m waiting on yours.”

“About the senate?” Tom asked.

“It’d be a nice thing to have a little Republican support for your Democratic prize boy when he’s up against the ropes, would it not?” Victor said, swirling the scotch in his glass as if trying to mix a glass of green and yellow paint until it was a even blue.

Tom sniffled and looked to Edward. “We go halfsies on your paper, whatever you end up calling it. I want a full split right down the middle.”

Edward grimaced. “That’s a hefty penance.”

“It’s not a negotiation. And if you find yourself in Congress in two years, you won’t be working for the government, you will be working for me.”

“Working with you, you mean.”

“You need to listen better.”

“I’m listening. But public policy isn’t the same thing as personal policy, is it?”

“In your case that’s exactly what it is. All you want is the title. Senator Rosewater, right? It’s got a nice ring to it and you’ve always been a man who prefers bells and whistles.”

Edward scoffed. “I think you’re forgetting a good many things you could stand to be grateful for.”

“I thought you wanted to bury the past?”

“With a shovel. You can have your fifty percent split of The Bee. That’s no problem.”

“You mean The Metropolitan?” Victor said.
“Right. That’s a serious name. Not very original, but serious. My son here has aspirations to ride my coattails all the way back to New York before long. Once he’s got a little more résumé fodder under his belt.”

“And you want to ride mine to Washington. It appears I’m the only man in this room who’s content to stay where he is,” Tom said. “But that’s okay. I like serious. There’s no room for funny business with serious.”

“Humor me, then. Are you in my corner or are you out? There’s a whole gaggle of folks outside and I’d like to greet them with the surprise news that not only am I alive, but that I’m headed for the legislature.”

Tom stood from his chair. “I’m on. So go make your announcement. In two years you’ll be in Washington and Victor will be back in New York if that’s what he wants. I guarantee it.”

Edward smiled. “Which leaves Omaha all for yourself.”

Tom did not reply. He simply wiped his mouth with his kerchief, stuffed it back inside his shirt cuff, and left the office envisioning a city permanently void of the Rosewater name.
Two days later, a saturnine dawn, the sky filling with hot clouds, a strip of purple as neat as brushstroke along the horizon. Nickeled light poured between the slats of Tom’s window blinds, casting bar-shaped shadows across the giant Turkish rug in the center of the room. Occupying the entire top floor of the Dodge European Hotel, his office served as headquarters for the Douglas County Democratic Party. The outside lobby was guarded by Milton and Chip Hoffmann--ex-prizefighting brothers from New Orleans. Both were seated in ladderback chairs and dressed in gabardine suits with big lapels that looked like they’d just been bought off the rack and bulged under the armpits from the pieces in their shoulder holsters.

Not even eight o’clock and already the lobby was full of men and women alike who waited to see the Boss. The line stretched into the hallway, down all three flights of the metal-banister staircase, out into the street and around the corner to the neighboring limestone post office building and Chinese laundry where Tom had all his shirts pressed and wrapped in scented paper--a heavier population of down-and-outers than a soup kitchen line.

Many of them were seeking employment. Tom rendered hundreds of jobs to perfect strangers through his many local business friendships: be it as a ding-ding on the electric streetcars, a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman, a scoop at a gelato parlor, a quarryman down in the water-filled pits dug along the banks of the Missouri, or even wearing sandwich boards on street corners advertising everything from umbrella menders to tobacconist shops. What appeared to be charity was really an investment. Tom was always resolute in reminding every person he assisted, “I will get you a job, but you have to pay for it.”
And pay for it they did. Always in terms of producing a vote and, in certain cases when the job was of a higher standing, the payment came in campaign donations cut right off the top of their paychecks. Still, Tom was no pinchfist when it came to helping the poor of the city. Whenever he was alerted to a family in need, he quickly rose to their aid. An Irish mother who lost her son to cholera and her husband to consumption in the same year was informed by one of Tom’s men that she had a non-expiring credit at Niemen’s Grocery. Every Saturday a clapboard apartment full of elderly residents had their coal bins refilled from a paneled delivery truck without a fee. On holidays his crew handed out whole frozen turkeys, canned goods and children’s toys to the needy and homeless. While the source of such generosities was never directly disclosed, everyone who ever received a helping hand nevertheless knew the name of the man who afforded them—and they knew his address.

The office itself was filled out with a slant-top desk clear of clutter save for a green bankers lamp and a jar of shaved pencils. A pair of tapestry chairs and a matching sofa next to a 46-star American flag drooping from a bronze staff. Potted plastic palms surrounded a cast iron chest safe holding the skims from nearly every business in the third ward’s sporting district. It also doubled as the bank for out-of-town criminals on the lam. A street map of Omaha as large as an architectural blueprint was pinned to the southern wall, and numerous photographs.

In one photograph there was Tom, his two top trainers, and five of his wirehaired terriers at a Dayton, Ohio, dog show—all smiles and leashes and wagging tails. In another, Tom with his wife Sue Anne and four-year-old daughter Francis posing for a professional family portrait against a washed background. A third showed Tom and his family again, this one more recent while on vacation in Brute, Montana, for a weekend of trout fishing. Not in the photograph but inside Tom’s memory every time he looked at the picture was Francis scooping minnows out of
a clear milldam with his fedora--using the hat like a net, forever ruining its satin lining--and catching fireflies in a mason jar.

There were also photographs of his closest associates. In one: Tom and Edward Rosewater on the front steps of the Bee Building circa 1901 when Edward still had both of his lungs and most of Tom’s trust. In another: Mayor Dahlman, bald as barber shave in a slim bowtie, receiving the key to the city--a key that stood a half foot taller than the man himself. And, finally, sitting on a stone bench in Tom’s backyard rhubarb garden were him and his two “brains”--Billy Nesselhous and George Lapidus, each man squinting against the sun with their pant legs yanked high enough to show their sock lines.

Currently, the same two men—Nesselhous, the reformed Jewish financer in his wrinkled tweed, and Lapidus, the conservative Jewish lobbyist in a gray sharkskin--were announced by Milton Hoffmann as he opened the office door.

Tom waved them in, still in the middle of a conversation with another man: J.B. Hummel, owner of the Riverside Zoo in North Omaha. Both Nesselhous and Lapidus took a seat on the couch at the back of the office while Hummel remained seated in the pink tapestry chair opposite Tom’s desk.

Never time enough for all his appointments, never enough, for it was the season of the Johnny-jump-ups, soybeans and sleeping shirtless on rooftops, dust storms and housecleaning, and, more than anything else, it was election season. The time of big business for small-time politics. So always a man in the chair, a couple more on the couch, twenty in the lobby, and every other Mother June and Uncle Pat all the way down the stairwell and out on the sidewalk.

And there was Tom: the political panjandrum still in his pajamas--a silk robe and carpet slippers. He had spent the night sleeping on the davenport in his office. For every ten minutes on
the job, another vote slung his party’s way. The straight ticket to victory earned by crooked company and straight hours. As he continued his conversation with Hummel, Tom stirred two spoonfuls of effervescent salt for “inner cleanliness” into a mug of hot water and slit another piece of mail with a teakwood letter opener.

Last night was The Thirteen’s monthly high-roller game of five-card stud—a table to which J.B. Hummel had been invited along with a few others—a couple of ward bosses, the lieutenant governor, J.J. Brandeis of Brandeis department stores, and Phillip Armour of the Armour stockyards in South Omaha who was hoping to score a contract that would give him the exclusive right to provide meat for Hummel’s zoo.

The details of said negotiation were discussed as the cards routinely fell in Hummel’s favor. Time and time again he was awarded large pots—some totaling more than five hundred dollars—after receiving high pairs dealt from the bottom of the deck. By the end of the night, Hummel was beaming drunk and nearly six-thousand dollars richer. A trio of Tom’s most expensive working girls hovered behind him as he pulled in his winnings hand after hand. They whispered their intentions in his ear and flaunted the curvature of their breasts laced up in their petticoats. Before the end of the night, Hummel was persuaded by Tom to sign the contract he previously refused while sober.

Now morning, just as a copy of that lucrative contract arrived at Phillip Armour’s office, Hummel—sitting up in a brothel bed while nursing his hangover with a stemmed glass of chalky seltzer water—was delivered his first bill for T-bones and porterhouses to be provided by the Armour packing plant. Outraged at Tom’s connivance, Hummel had stormed into the office—sitting where he was now—and argued the contract was void because he was coaxed into signing it while under the influence.
As Nesselhous and Lapidus eased onto the couch at the rear of the room, Tom gave them a wink and handed Hummel an envelope. “This here is another bit of documentation I meant to give you.”

Hummel opened the flap and found a blank sheet of paper inside. “What’s this? Some kind of joke?”

“No, it’s an invitation for you to be on my ticket for the city council. I understand you’re a man who fancies nature. Woodlands and what have you. Well, how would you like to be superintendent of parks and recreation? This city is an eyesore. All commerce and no beauty. Surely you could do great things to spruce it up given the chance.”

Hummel flung the blank sheet of paper back onto the desk.

“Still think that meat contract is nugatory? Surely your lions and bears could do with some grade-A cuts, especially after the profits you raked in last night.”

“So you cheat a man out of his money and hand it to me with the hopes I will use it to pay his bill? What a gag. You are some kind of a schemer. Some kind of a sonofabitch I haven’t-”

“Whoa, whoa,” Tom said. “What profit is there for me in this? I’m not a schemer. I’m a matchmaker. Since when does a businessman like yourself not need the assistance of a go-between? That’s how the world spins and that’s how money gets made for both sides, I hate to tell you.”

“Right, you’re the finger and I’m the twine wrapped around it.”

“No, I’m Tom and you’re J.B.”

“You’re a rogue!”
Tom stood from his chair and threw his eyeglasses on his desk. “Smarten up, would you? You have exotic animals to feed and those slaughterhousers have domestic meat to sell. Is it more expensive than that sinew you’re paying for now? Sure it is. You need help with the money that comes along with that from time to time? You come to me. Take a look around. Do I look like I can’t afford a few steaks? You want to build parks in this city and I offer you a job that will allow to do just that with municipal funds and you have the nerve to call me a rogue? I’m no rogue. I’m a middle-of-the-road proxy, nothing more.”

“Oh yes. I’m sure I’ve sorely misjudged you. I’m sure the reason you had to orchestrate this deal behind the cloak of inebriation and rotten cards instead of an honest proposal is because you’re a lily white mediator. And I’m also sure that the reason you can afford a few steaks, as you say, is because you’re philanthropist who likes to raise money for others and none for yourself.”

“Money ain’t what I’m trying to gain from this. Believe it or not, there are things more valuable than a dollar, especially when you already have barrels full of them.”

“Like what?”

Tom stepped forward and straightened Mr. Hummel’s jacket lapels. “Like friendship. Like allies. And, like I said, I’m a fence. You think I get rich from fleecing zoo keepers and butchers?”

“You’re fleecing somebody.”

Tom smiled. “Well, everybody needs friends.”

“You sure got a funny way of making them.”

“And yet I still have them. I’m hoping you might be my next.”

Hummel exhaled. “What do you propose then?”
Tom returned to his desk chair and uncapped a fountain pen. “I propose you honor the agreement you signed, color out those six-thousand dollars worth of chips you won last night, and go home to tell your wife the good news that come next year you will be the on the city council as the superintendent of parks and recreation.”

As Hummel slumped out of the office—*He who comes in like a lion will leave like a lamb, the Dennison-Democratic Motto*—Nesselhous and Lapidus took up the two chairs in front of the desk. Both men were a real pair of yawns. The type of calculator bunnies who found all the pleasure of the world by figuring interest in seven-tenths of a single percent. Both were also connected with big business throughout the city and more than a little suspicious of the game of politics, but a game they still played all the same. Nesselhous looked every inch of a Jewish accountant: receding black hairline, foggy bifocals, prominent cheekbones, caterpillar-thick eyebrows, a beaked nose that could’ve won him more than his fair share of photo finishes if he were a quarter horse and not a money man.

Lapidus, for all the equal boredom of his profession, could always be found where the limelight was the thickest. A married man who strolled around town with a new moll every other day, the multitude of ersatz ladies who attached themselves to his shirt cuffs possessing shorter shelf-lives than a bottle of yellow milk on a hot porch stoop. He was sporting a fresh bruise on his left eye that colored nearly half of his face with the violet varnish of burst capillaries. Either he had a go with a circus bear or a meaty Ukrainian whore, for ol’ George—a tiny man with tiny hands and a rumored tiny something else—loved himself all things large, be it trained grizzlies peddling unicycles with their hairy legs or chubby beauties peddling what was between their shaved ones.
“Jesus H., George, you look like the last drop in the bucket,” Tom said and bit into a chocolate biscuit from a silver breakfast tray that also held pears in syrup, a bottle of A&B pale-dry ginger ale, a bucket of ice, and a dish of lemon slices. “How did you get the shiner?”

“Ran into Finn O’Malley a couple days back. Walked right up and cold-cocked me without so much as a Howdy-Do,” Lapidus said, referring to the fat attorney with the ketchup stain on his white suit who Tom had given the verbal what’s-what at the shoeshine stand.

“Apparently somebody put him in a bad mood earlier that morning,” Nesselhous added.

Tom chuckled. “That soggy fat ass has just eaten his last helping of mama’s pot pie. Did you hear about the clatter going on with Louie Baloogie?”

“Louie Black?” Lapidus said. “It’s more than clatter. They’ve issued the call for a special election. Didn’t you see this morning’s ink?”

“Not before breakfast since my stomach’s been in a twist,” Tom said and patted the side of his tiny gut, right above the kidney. “I feel like I got me three feet of bowels just packed sour with bile and the news as of late has been ruining my appetite.”

“Well, I hope you already ate today,” Nesselhous responded and flung the morning edition of The Herald on Tom’s desk.

Tom tucked the curls of his eyeglasses behind his ears, picked up the paper and let the headline sink in for a moment: “The Machine is Trimming this City.”

The author of the editorial was Josiah Willard, a twitchy Republican muckraker with a history of penning every Democratic political hiccup as the sour grass of gangland tactics ordered from the invisible throne on that, the top floor of the Dodge Hotel. Over the years, and especially since the Democrats took over the city, Willard’s typewriter ribbon had earned him more than a few poisoned chocolate bars left on his desk and daggers on his car seat courtesy of
those whose names appeared in his column. Tom tipped his half-moon-shaped reading spectacles down to the bridge of his nose and skimmed the article as Nesselhous and Lapidus waited silently for his reaction.

This most recent spot of ink didn’t have Tom thinking confectionary threats or gifted blades, but a few pops of lead, two in the chest, two in the brain. The exact ingredients for a prolonged period of writer’s block for Mr. Willard or any of those other torchy wordsmiths on The Herald’s payroll who might feel barrel-chested enough to take up that paper’s political line on all things capital D, be they Dennison or Dahlman, Democrat or Donkey, Deity or Dictation.

In his brief read, Tom learned what he’d been suspecting for the past two days since his conversation with Finn O’Malley: the special election to recall Mayor Dahlman was set for the end of the month, the petition against him had already secured over sixty-thousand signatures, and that if the majority of the votes against the mayor led to his ousting, Louie Black--head of the recall forces--would have five days to certify the election that would leave it to public to pick Dahlman’s successor.

Tom glanced over the top of his paper and shoved his telephone stand across his desk towards Billy and George. “One of you get on the horn with Josiah’s wife and make sure she has all the necessary contact information for a good funeral parlor.”

“Don’t be melodramatic,” Nesselhous replied and replaced the phone’s receiver back in its cradle as it had tipped over. “Willard’s not the problem. This is real news and if it wasn’t his name at the top of the article, it would’ve been someone else’s.”

“Where does Louie Black eat his lunch?” Tom asked.

“I already told you, we can’t fight it that way,” Nesselhous said.

“Do they even have a candidate to run against him?”
“I’m sure Louie Black would be at the top of Louie’s list,” Lapidus said.

Tom began to scan the article again. On page two, The Herald had printed the full text of the ten reasons for the mayor’s necessary evacuation of office listed on the original petition. Reclining back in his chair, Tom began to quote them out loud:

“Number one,” he said calmly, as if reading the ingredients to a new recipe for soda bread. “Tolerated lawlessness by law enforcement agencies. Two, seeks to weld street railway and other city employees into political machine by manipulation of patronage and public funds. Three, hindered the police commissioner, J.J. Donahue, in his enforcement of the law by taking control of the vice squad from his jurisdiction following a series of raids on gambling houses and harems and later discharged him for enforcing the law against illicit businesses secretly backed by and backing the mayoral administration. Four, directed that public records be kept secret--”

“We read the article already,” Nesselhous interrupted.

“Who’s against us?” Tom asked.

“Well,” Lapidus said. “Louie Black, obviously. Gibbons, the city clerk. The entire Omaha Business Men’s Association, or nearly all of them. Donahue’s all full of spite for getting the axe, too. Councilman Hall. A couple other nobodies.”

“Nobodies, huh? Well, they’re somebodies enough to put us in a battle for ballots twice in the same six months. Christ, the real primary is already coming up in September.”

“When’s the last time you talked to the mayor?” Nesselhous asked.

“If it were five minutes ago it wouldn’t be soon enough. But I did talk to Fat Finn the other day, so I guess I’m really not that surprised. Same day you got the pretty all over your face, George,” Tom said and sighed. “Sorry he took it out on you, kid.”
Lapidus touched his bruise gently and Nesselhous helped himself to a lemon slice off Tom’s breakfast tray, saying: “We heard. But O’Malley, he’s got himself all twisted up now since you two last jawed and he wants the Democratic nomination for the State Supreme Court Bench to make up for it.”

“To make up for what? Me hurting his feelings?”

“He could cause us a whole heap of headaches,” Lapidus said. “I already got a boiling one, myself.”

“Two days ago he was a Republican,” Tom said. “Today he’s a Democrat? Well, maybe tomorrow he’ll be a corpse.”

Nesselhous shrugged off the notion. “We’re in a soft at last and that kinda thing could put us right back between the hard stuff.”

“In a soft?” Tom said. “You call outright sabotage being in a soft?”

“Look, this kind of thing isn’t anything new.”

“It just broke this morning,” Tom said angrily.

“All I’m saying is that it happens in most cities of any real size.”

“And all I’m saying is no one would be surprised if fat boy Finn choked on a chicken bone or had himself a neat and tidy little heart attack over his morning porridge.”

“Now’s not the time for rash decisions,” Nesselhous said. “Or reprisals.”

“Right, they’re fighting dirty and you want me to keep my hands clean.”

The great stickler for doing things according-to-Hogle, Nesselhous switched gears and pointed back towards the office door with his thumb. “That zoo fella you had in here? You offered him superintendent of parks and recreation?”

“You already offered that position to Jim Cully,” Lapidus said.

Tom looked up at the ceiling. The list of men on his straight ticket for the coming November elections was not written in the plaster. “Maybe I did. Come to think of it, I promised Phil Mallon the same spot. Either way, it’s Mr. Hummel’s now. Straighten that out for me, would you?”

“It’ll cost you thirty pieces of silver,” Nesselhous said--the only Jew in all of Omaha who could make quick-witted, New Testament references about the price of betrayal in an office where duplicity was the only singular force greater than money.

“Just make ‘em happy,” Tom said. “What else, now?”

“We hear Edward Rosewater is back in town,” Lapidus said.

Tom scratched something onto a lined pad of paper. “Yeah, that old bird wants to be made Senator.”

“It’s a smart play,” Nesselhous said. “Considering this other nonsense.”

“Man’s older than the letter W,” Lapidus agreed. “My money says he doesn’t live long enough to see this city election.”

“Which is why I ain’t worried about him for the moment. But it is smart to let him think we are. Leave that to me,” Tom said, snapped his frames back into his spectacle case, stood up from behind his desk, and traded handshakes with both men.

He bid them farewell and thanks for their visit for he had to change out of his bed cap and terrycloth sometime that day before stepping out to see the “cowboy blow his trumpet,” as Nesselhous put it. Which meant Mayor Dahlman--the Cowboy Mayor, the first incumbent Democratic mayor up for reelection in Omaha in nearly twenty years--was scheduled to give one of his famous sidewalk speeches that afternoon to address the charges against him in the recall:
the little runt in a big ten-gallon hat standing on the seat of a split-bottom chair, spitting the cool blue Democratic fire against those who were plotting to burn him down.

* * *

Three and half years earlier: February 1906. Well past two in the morning and Tom was preparing for bed in the same Dodge Hotel office. He sniffed a clot of apricot snuff from a decorative tortoiseshell box while listening to A Hot Time in the Old Town on his cylinder phonograph. A glass of iced milk perspired on his desk. His wife Sue Anne was asleep in the back bedroom as he went through his nightly routine: applying a few hearty fingertips of cream deodorant to his armpits, scrubbing the bandoline hair dressing from his scalp, rubbing soda ash on his teeth to maintain their whiteness and powdering his genitals with talcum to prevent rash.

Once dressed in a bathrobe and slippers, he clicked off his desk lamp, swallowed the milk in three large gulps and was dozing in his chair when a booming knock on his office door woke him from his trance. He grabbed his .44 Colt from his desk drawer and switched back on his lamp.

“Who’s there?” he asked without opening the door.

“Tom, it’s Alan. I’m here with Greg Little. Sorry to wake you at this hour, but we have a situation that needs your attention.”

“Who’s at the door tonight?”

“Milton,” Alan said.

“I’m here too,” Milton said through the door. “It’s alright.”

“Tom, open up. It’s urgent,” Alan said again.
As Tom unlocked the door, he saw Alan and Greg—both dressed in their eight-button police uniforms. They had been working the night shift beat along the river. Tom nodded to Milton and he left the two officers standing in the doorway. With them was a third man cuffed in manacles whom Tom did not recognize.

“What’s this all about?” he asked as the two officers led the unknown man into his office and sat him down hard in the chair opposite Tom’s desk. He was clearly inebriated, spots of blood on his evening dress shirt, his string tie loose and tugged down past his third button. He could hardly hold his own head up.

“We thought it the better to bring him here instead of taking him to lockup,” Alan said. “He roughed up one of your girls at The Thirteen pretty bad.”

“Which girl?”

“Lily, I think. Or Violet. One of the ones named after a flower.”

“Christ, Alan, half of them are named after flowers. You think that narrows it down?”

“She’ll be alright. He gave her a couple good wallops to the face, but she’ll live.”

Tom sat down at his desk and replaced his Colt in the top drawer. “This sort of thing happens once a week. Why didn’t you take this blower to county holding?”

“Tom, this is James Dahlman.”

“Since that answers my question.”

Alan cleared his throat. “James Dahlman. The Democratic candidate for mayor.”

At that news, Tom inched forward in his seat. “I see. Of course. Well, right you were to bring him to me. That’s good thinking on your part.” He rose to twist the knob on his cast-iron safe. He retrieved two bills from inside and handed one to each of the officers. “Who else knows about this?”
Alan removed the manacles from James’ wrists. “No one besides a few other drunkards who witnessed the affair.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way. That’s a fine job, Al. Greg, you too,” Tom said and opened the door to see them out. “I’ll handle this from here.”

The officers both nodded, tipped their hats and left. Tom sat down at his desk and studied the man sitting across from him. His eyes were closed and a large wound to his left temple—presumably inflicted from the end of Alan’s baton—bled down his cheek. He was finely dressed—half businessman, half cowboy—with a pair of pointed-toe boots, a black string tie and a silver, ten-gallon hat resting loosely on the crown of his head. Tom knew of the man but had never met him before. He was the primary competition against Rosewater’s incumbent mayoral candidate—R.C. Cushing, a Republican lawyer originally from Tennessee. After a few minutes, James snapped awake and looked around the office. Tom poured him a glass of water from a crystal decanter and pushed it across his desk.

James snorted up the blood that was running out of his nose. “Am I in jail?”

“Well, I know I’m not the most garish fellow when it comes to brick-a-brac, but does this look like a jail?” Tom paused. “If you’d rather go there, I could arrange that.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m the man whose girl you assaulted tonight.”

James laughed and picked up the water glass. “Your girlfriend’s a whore?”

Tom spread his arms. “All of my girlfriends are whores. All one hundred and sixty of them. If I were you, though, I’d wise up about who you want to call a whore. I’d also wise up to the distinct possibility that if word of this got out, your aspirations for a job in this town wouldn’t be able to get you work at a free-lunch counter. So, James, this can go one of two ways—”
“Call me Jim.”

“Right. Cowboy Jim. That’s what they call you, isn’t it?” Tom said and handed him two aspirin tablets.

“That’s right.”

“Cowboy Jim. I know all about you. A ranch hand from the sand hills. Spent a spell as sheriff out west in Chadron, right? Cowboy Jim, married with three children and the Democratic candidate for mayor spending a Thursday night in a whorehouse while his wife and kids are asleep at home.”

“I get what you’re saying. No need to rehash it,” Dahlman replied. He chewed the aspirins, dipped a fold of his neckerchief bandana into the water glass and held the wet cloth against the wound on his temple.

Tom stood from his desk and paced the room. “Cowboy Jim. The man who spends his weekday nights drinking and roughing up working girls.”

“What is this? You a priest? You going to lecture me about my sins?”

“Of course not. Sin is good for business. At least for my business. But for you? The voting public sure wouldn’t care too much for yours after they read about it on the front page of The Bee come Saturday morning. Story like that, that’s a seller. I bet we could give you a thirty-inch column for news that juicy.”

“I suppose there’s an option B?”

“You suppose right. In fact, you punching that whore—”

“Slap. I slapped her a couple times is all. Open palm. I didn’t make a fist.”

“Slap, punch, kick. It doesn’t matter. What does matter is that it could work out to your advantage if you play your cards right. Last I heard, you’re a six-to-one underdog against
Cushing. Tough odds, especially when running against a Republican in a city that hasn’t voted against that party in twenty years.”

“Six to one. How do you figure? It ain’t a damn horse race.”

Tom walked over to his phonograph and took the tone arm off the grove, silencing the music. “That’s exactly what it is. And a horse would have a better chance getting votes than you at this rate. But that all can change in an month.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that?”

“Because I’m the odds maker in this city and I would very much like to swing the odds in your favor.”

“If you’re so sure of your power, why don’t you run yourself?”

“I don’t have the stomach for the pulpit. Or the camera.”

“Right. I know what you are. But I got enough strings pulling me in different directions as it is.”

“You’re getting me wrong. I’m just not a fan of the public eye is all. You, on the other hand, have the people’s touch, no?”

“I know you. I’ve seen your picture in the paper.”

“That’s right. You probably have.”

“For a man who claims to hate the camera, you sure get your face on the print page a lot. Can’t place your name, though.”

“Thomas Dennison.”

“Thomas Dennison? The theatre man?”

“No. Thomas Dennison, the man who’s going to make you the next mayor of Omaha.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”
“I have my ways. Now, my friend Mr. Rosewater of The Bee,” Tom paused. “Are you familiar with that name? Edward Rosewater?”

James bent over in pain. “Sure. Everyone in the city knows that name.”

“Well, Edward and I are partners and he thinks Cushing is the answer to our prayers, but I’m not so sure. Reason why you and I are even having this conversation. But before we go any further, we have to come an agreement.”

“What kind of agreement?”

“Well, I have certain ventures and interests that are small enough they go on without interruption. I would like to see those same ventures continue to go on without interruption once they are big enough to notice.”

“What are we talking here? A few whorehouses? A few saloons? Fine. I don’t have a problem with that kind of thing.”

“Obviously, you’re a regular patron.”

James rubbed his eyes. “My shtick is crime, anyways. Always has been.”

“Crime? Fancy that. The whore-beating cowboy wants to run his mayoral campaign on the anti-crime ticket. Tell me, Cowboy Jim, do you know where most crimes in this city are committed?”

“I’d go out on a limb and say they happen in the same whorehouses and saloons you’re so eager to protect.”

Tom smiled and sat back down in his leather maroon chair. “Like what happened tonight, for instance. Not to rub it in, of course. But do you know why those crimes happen there?” he asked, snorted another fingertip of snuff and itched his nose. “Almost always because there’s not
enough booze and broads to go around for everyone. The remedy is that the more whiskey and women we keep in stock, the less chance there is for a brawl to break out.”

James laughed and took off his hat. “You sure do got yourself a slanted perspective on how to fix a problem.”

“How’s your head feeling?”

James patted his wound gingerly with his wet bandana. “Like it was just bashed in by the end of a police wand.”

“Well, you can go on getting your head bashed in or you can go back to being the sheriff for some podunk hallow way the hell out in the middle of nowhere or maybe even spend a night in the jailhouse. But if you’d rather have the dice start rolling over in your favor, maybe we can work something out?”

* * *

At six o’clock sharp Tom draped his checkered suitcoat over his forearm like a waiter’s towel, said goodbye to the Hoffmann brothers who had cleared the lobby and were sawing away a quick nap reared back on the hind legs of their chairs, and took a birdcage elevator down to the hotel lobby. Forgoing a driver, he had called to tell Harry Buford to take the rest of the day off, a better evening for shoe soles than tire rubber.

The streets were narrow with heavy foot traffic. It was the eve of Independence Day. Daylight fireworks sizzled. Children played skelly with bottle caps on the footpaths in front of their homes and lit strings of firecrackers on the sidewalks in the last hour before dinner. A group of women carried drum-shaped shopping boxes out of a millinery store. With his shirt pits
stained with sweat and his sleeves rolled to the elbow, Tom walked the five blocks from his office down to one of Madam Anna Wilson’s old brothels, The Berryman: a three-story, yellow brick Victorian with blue shutters, heavy gold drapes, and marble columns of Greek Goddesses greeting patrons as they entered the vestibule.

The head mistress was Louise Vinciquerra, a two-hundred pound, former Italian beauty queen with a streak of hippopotamus mean in her blood. Despite employing four doormen every night, she handled the enforcement of The Berryman herself and took great pleasure in doing so. Once she’d bashed a man’s head into a wall until his forehead cracked and his brain leaked out his ears just for grabbing one of her girls too roughly around the arm. The poor sap spent the rest of days in a somnambulistic haze, carting around a wheelbarrow full of pinecones and hawking them for one hundred dollars a piece, no negotiations. In another occurrence, she handcuffed the head of the urban planning committee to the pipe of a hot water radiator in the basement and left him chained there for a week with a shit bucket and a hose connected to a sink for drinking water after he urinated on a whore’s face because she giggled when he unzipped his trousers.

Only slight past the dinner hour now and already The Berryman’s main barroom was a saturnalia of pipe tobacco, cackling laughter, pine paneling, ragtime pounded out on a solid gold piano, and overstuffed armchairs occupied by the usual society stags who wore spaghetti sauce stains on their shirtfronts like buttons and stubble on their cheeks like creosote on fence posts. Waitresses wearing change belts, white pumps, and nothing else served pours of Old Overholt neat and mugs of draft pilsner to the men as they waited for their particular girl’s next available opening or, if not frequent customers, were busy eyeing their possible selections who sauntered about the room in frocks and silk poplin dresses.
Tom walked across the parlor like a man ready to split lightning, ordered a short glass of clam juice at the bar counter and drained it in a single gulp. He took the stairs to the top floor past a fresco-plastered hallway lit by gas lamps and entered Madam Vinciquerra’s private boudoir after knocking softly on the door.

Seated on silk divan and only half-dressed in lace drawers, silk stockings and flannelette night robe was the new Queen of the Underworld herself. Upon seeing Tom, Louise stood with a jasmine cigarette burning in her hand and walked over to him with Lucy and Mabel, a pair of cocker spaniels, yipping at her feet.

“How’s life in the fleshpot?” Tom greeted her with a hug, kissed her on each cheek, and removed his coconut straw hat.

“Feeling daffy are you? I hope this is a social call.”

“What’s it? You don’t believe in the cottage variety of love?”

“That wife of yours still kicking around?”

“The day my marital bed goes cold, you’ll be the first to know.”

Louise feigned pouting. “It’s a sad life, always playing second fiddle.”

“Yeah, that’s you all over. Delicate as a soap bubble.”

“Well,” Louise sighed and pulled her robe shut. “You’re not here for whoopee and you’re sure as hell not here to collect, so what else is there?”

“Dirt,” Tom said as Louise led him out past a pair of French doors to her sitting balcony. “And lots of it.”

Together they sat outside on a wrap-around, stone veranda. Tom placed his hat on the small patio table like straw dinner plate. His shirt collar had darkened with sweat. A shelf of thunderclouds loomed on the horizon. As Louise situated herself in the opposite chair, Tom lit an
Iron Horse cigar and pulled at a chipped pottery ashtray. A jug of sparkling water and a serving bowl of fruit--apricots, figs, kumquats, seeded cherries, cantaloupe cut into boomerang-shaped sections--rested in the center of the table. The balcony was garishly decorated with trellises of climbing grapevine and orange roses, a Baroque balustrade and marble statues of Apollo and Daphne.

“I love the gossip hour as much as the next gal, but when it comes to spilling the goods, you go first,” Louise said, crossing her legs at the knee and squinting into the soapy summer sunlight.

Tom reached into his coat pocket and tossed three folded, fifty-dollar bills onto the table. Louise stared at the cash but didn’t reach for it. She never moved for money. After all, she was no whore.

“That’s a lot of cake. You must be after something really juicy,” she said, sucking delicately on her cigarette, its smoke rising without being stirred by the breeze, the filter stained with lipstick.

Of all the men who called city hall their office, of all the deputized officers who walked a beat, for every businessman who owned a topcoat and for every thug who ever fired a pump gun or cheated at cards, Madam Louise knew all their secrets and could dish them up in alphabetical order or spread them faster than a newspaper switchboard, depending on how you wanted your meat cooked. The ears in her twelve bawdy houses throughout the city were many and the mouths that entered them were always jabbing--everything from politics to dark fantasies and who-killed-who to the fix on the next prizefight. Every vagary of existence in that metropolis on the prairie sea, be it big wig or small fry, Democrat or Republican, eventually rested a head on one of Louise’s scented pillows, all the way from the mayor’s Thursday night hour with his
favorite strawberry-haired Matilda to Benny the busboy paying a dollar to watch the show for ten minutes through a peephole.

“I was wondering if you got a chance to read today’s headlines,” Tom said.

“To tell you the truth, I was expecting you. All the badness about Jimmy,” Louise said, referring to Mayor James Dahlman, “somebody’s been stirring still water.”

“The mayor’s in trouble,” Tom admitted with some pain. “Serious this time.”

“I know. Everyone in town is talking.”

“Even people who can’t read,” Tom said.

“Well, whoever’s causing the ruckus better watch out for your fireworks.”

“I wish it were that simple.”

Louise laughed. “Something tells me you’ve been talking to your cooler heads.”

“Billy and George stopped by earlier this morning to give me their chew.”

“So what do you need from me?”

Tom looked down to the street below. A group of khaki-clad Negroes were huddled around a freshly waxed Buick, showing each other their teeth. A child in a black straw hat carried a brick of ice cream out of a sweet shop. Streetcars, taxi cabs, and horse-drawn butter wagons were at their full evening pitch, the worst traffic jam Farnam had seen since it was an Indian trail. “The usual role call. Infidelities, sexual indiscretions, all that dark-lantern hokum.”

“Anyone in particular?”

Tom reached into his breast pocket and produced a sheet of folded paper. “Four names. Black, O’Malley, Donahue, Willard.”

Louise stared at the paper just as she had the money--without batting an eyelash. “Josiah Willard? That little squeak journo from The Herald?”
“The same,” Tom said and slid the paper across the table.

Louise stabbed out her cigarette into the muddy ashtray and finally reached for the note. After reading the four names, she smiled. “A fat lawyer, a small time politician, and a police chief.”

“Former police chief,” Tom corrected her.

“This doesn’t sound like your usual dig in the onion patch.”

“Because it’s not.”

“Well, I can already tell about two of them off the top of my head. Your little friend Willard’s been staying at the Paxton since three weeks ago. Every Tuesday night he calls over for a girl to be brought over and pays extra for it. Won’t even step foot out of that hotel as far as I know. So he’s worried about something.”

Tom smirked without pleasure. “I wonder what that could be.”

“Your lawyer pal comes in to see Miss Rose three or four times a week.”

“Certain nights?”

“Not sure. Would have to do some checking.”

“Well, check on all of them. And let me know soon,” Tom said, stood from the tiny bistro table, squashed his hat back on his head and pointed at the money. “If that isn’t enough, just let me know.”

“You could always pay me in other ways,” Louise said.

Tom chuckled and bent over to kiss her cheek. “I’ll be seeing you, doll. And don’t spread this dust more than you have to. I don’t want anyone getting sketchy.”

“Send your wife my regards,” Louise said with a smile.
Tom lifted two fingers farewell and left the cathouse to resume his walk—eight more blocks—to the Burlington Train Station on Tenth Street. Along his way, the pedestrian traffic in the third ward was bustling with a pre-holiday fervor. Past the dinner hour now, a few shirtless pickaninnies sat along the curbs, sweat reflective on their dark skin like polish on wood. Livestock commission men with their big bellies and short neckties waddled from their sheep lots to the nearby soda shops so they could worry down a few room-temperature pours of ale before heading home. As Tom passed by Howard Street, front doors and windows were left wide open, the people inside going about their chores in their underwear. On Leavenworth, somebody had twisted the cap off a fire plug valve so children could play in the pressurized spray of the hydrant until a man from the municipal water service came by in his jumpsuit uniform to turn the water off.

Mayor Dahlman’s first speech to address the recall petition set against him was still an hour away. To bide the time, Tom drifted into the north entrance of the Burlington depot and upstairs to the gentlemen’s smoking room. He crossed the grand lobby—garishly adorned with Sienna marble columns, mosaic floors, bronzed heads of mountain sheep, and a red tile ceiling—that was full of folks with rolled train tickets in their hands and carpet bags at their feet.

In the back corner of the smoking room, he took a seat at the mahogany bar counter. Having skipped lunch to squeeze in as many appointments with the public as the day would allow, he bought two deviled ham sandwiches wrapped in oiled paper, a yellow apple, and a cigar from a glass colander on the bar counter.

After hammering down one of the sandwiches and pocketing the other along with the apple for later, he turned to stand in front of a tall window over the track level of the station. The Evening Special on the Missouri-Pacific line was currently boarding. Staring out at the mess of
rails laid like iron chicken scratch in the dust and unused boxcars further out in the marshalling yard, Tom fell into daze of locomotive steam, running gear twitching to life, and departure whistles. He stood there for a long time after the train was gone, perhaps until it was as far south as Falls City or St. Joseph. Finally a counter boy in a wedge cap who was refilling the tin napkin holders asked him if everything was alright. Suddenly, the smoking room was empty. The mayor’s motorcade--a string of three black Packards with whitewall tires--had arrived outside the station. The first counter blow in the battle for Omaha’s political marrow was about to begin.

* * *

A crowd of nine hundred people flooded the steps of the train station despite temperatures that had inched towards the mid-nineties. A bandstand with red, white, and blue bunting around its base like a bed skirt had been erected on the second tier of marble steps as the horde--prompted by the accusations in Josiah Willard’s newspaper story--filled the colonnade and spilled out into center of Tenth Street.

As the numbers grew, people climbed onto rooftops, scaffolds and up telegraph pole pegs to obtain a panorama of the boisterous mass. From a few stories above, it appeared much like a pointillist painting where every head was covered in a hat like a dot of paint: pearl gray homburgs, workman’s cloth caps, straw porkpies. Reporters with press cards sticking out of their fedora bands set up their wooden studio cameras on tripods, ducked their heads under black hoods and sent flash powder into the air. Mounted police patrolled the area, their rifle butts sagging in the hold of their saddle scabbards. Their horses clopped around the perimeter of the crowd as if trying to herd it or even shrink its size and occasionally dropping big raw green
clumps from under their swishing tails. On the outskirts of the rally, automobiles backfired claps of exhaust and blatted their horns as the intersection in front of the depot was impassable in every direction.

Mayor Dahlman had arrived at five minutes to seven, dressed in his finest silverbelly Stetson over a white watchcap, pointed toe boots, and tailor-cut suit. He exited the backseat of his touring sedan, refused the platform built for his speech, and climbed onto the roof of his car. Waving his Stetson in the air, he paused to the survey the crowd before thundering out his appeal to the masses.

Tom appeared on the scene halfway into his address, leaning one shoulder against a lamppost at the back of the crowd. He used the square end of his necktie to wipe the sweat from his brow as the mayor continued his retort to the accusations penned against him in the papers:

“...the Republican guard has enjoyed a dynasty over this city for a long time. All their pals were in the right places, pet contractors won all the bids and the officials who gave them those bids for their pavement and sewer jobs waxed fat off those deals. They are the same officials who are now out for my blood. But to understand the present situation one must go back to the past and in that past along came an outsider with no political ties,” the mayor said and paused to point at himself with both thumbs.

“Along came a man, a plain citizen just like yourselves who was elected by you, the plain citizens, and that man was me. I won my appointment as chief executive officer of this city through honesty and the promise to sweep the dirt of the previous administration out from under the rug. And I’ve made good on the same promises I ran my campaign on. I put an end to those biased and unchallenged opportunities for contractual favoritism. And the old guard? Their big talk about taxpayer’s return was always just that, big talk. And now that this city is strife with
summer heat three years later when I’m on the verge of being elected to service this city again, my
opponents are waging war against me to recover possession of their silk-lined political nest.
But I plan on keeping those corruptors out of city hall and their sticky hands out of your
pocketbooks for a second term in a row. They don’t want to wait for the cooler weather of
November when the next city elections are upon us, but they want to fight out it now in this
ragged heat when the sweat of your labor might affect your better judgment.

“When I took office nearly three years ago, this city’s affairs were in a dismal condition.
There was corruption at every turn. Their control of the Department of Public Works led to
sewers and streets being built at a cost of two-hundred thousand dollars a mile and they were all
defective. Not long after I arrived in city hall I had a commission of expert engineers chosen by
the common council make a report on all that construction, and in that report it was discovered it
would take nearly half a million dollars to fix those faulty roads and sewers.

“Think about what half a million dollars of taxpayers’ money means--your money that
should be in your pocket and on your family’s table. The average wage in this city is seventy
cents a day. And how many folks even earn that much? Not nearly enough. I’ve been pushing for
a dollar-a-day wages, but even if the wage was a whole dollar, it would take five-hundred and
forty seven years of every penny of one man’s salary to replace those sewers you already paid
for once and now have to pay for twice. Those responsible for this are protected by the
newspapers and the same machinery of the former administration who now seek to put me out of
office in this recall election, not because I have abandoned my duties, but because I have
performed them.

“I will not stand for such forces to waste your hard-earned money to line their own
pockets. And those same somebodies behind this recall have appointed an additional forty-
thousand dollars of your money to conduct this election. But I will stand up against them. This is your money, folks. Your money, not theirs. And I will stand up against them and stand up for every taxpaying citizen who cannot afford the mortgage on their home or who works two jobs to support their family only to never see their family because they are always on the clock. I will also stand up for the people who have no jobs or only get two or three days of work a week. So let me ask you, the same good people who had faith enough in me to put where I am today to keep me there. Let me ask you to fight with me and against these crooks who dare to spread their propagandist literature against me just to have themselves this straw vote…”

As the mayor continued towards the end of his speech, Tom left the scene and began to walk down Tenth Street, holding his jacket over his shoulder with a single finger like a hook. From his pocket he retrieved a canister of ribbon gum, bit off a hunk, and chewed it vigorously as he strolled to the end of the street.

More folks were arriving on the scene: workingmen and union men on their way home from their jobs who stopped out of curiosity to see what all the hubbub was about, women in gingham aprons who’d stepped out of their kitchens, teenagers smoking rolled tea leaves, even a group of Felician order nuns in their heavy brown wool frocks and sisterhood veils. People were sitting on each level of apartment fire escapes with their feet dangling between the gaps in the bars.

A block away from the central mass, a two-piece band--a pair of young boys with a trombone and a cornet--were stepping towards the gathering as they played a lively but spotty rendition of *Stars and Stripes Forever*. As Tom passed them, he shoved a quarter into one of their pockets to keep the music going. Moments later, Alan York--one of the two police officers who had brought Mayor Dahlman to Tom’s office on the first night they met--approached the
boys as he wagged his nightstick. He asked the cornetist to knock off the presidential blow and play an Irish tune instead.

Catching sight of Alan, Tom walked backward three paces and said out of the side of his mouth, “Better do as he says, boys. This copper plays dirty.”

Alan grinned at the sight of Tom and shooed the boys away with a quick wave of his hand. “Well, I’ll be. Mr. Tom. How’s tricks?”

“All rosy dreams and high hopes today, old boy.”

“The mayor certainly looks fit to be tied standing up there on his damn car.”

Tom shook Alan’s hand. “He sure ain’t the Salvation Army.”

“The orator in action, huh?”

“For now. Next week he’ll be ready to crawl and eat mud for this kind of crowd,” Tom said, spit on the ground, and patted Alan farewell on his shoulder.

“What’s the hurry, Mister D? Running off to a bridge appointment?”

“Last week I saw a hindoo sword swallower on this street. That was a lot better than this.” He paused. “Speaking of, what’s a detective sergeant doing out this way? Looking for the best hot lunch stand in town?”

“Come off it. I’ve spent all day ankling around town trying to gets folks to sign this anti-election petition. My feet feel like a pair of pulled teeth.”

“What happened to all that sally forth and tally-ho enthusiasm you were gushing in my office last week?”

“About gone the way of my shoe leather,” Alan said and lifted one of his worn soles for show.
“Well, come on down to the Berryman sometime this weekend. I’ll buy you a frog dinner and have one of the girls soak your dogs in a hot salt bath.”

“Too much thievery and murdering going around town this summer for me to take a night off. Hardly have time to give a square one to the wife,” Alan smiled. “And boy has she been begging for it.”

Tom laughed and shook Alan’s hand again. “Glad to hear it. But don’t go trying to clean up too much of this city all at once. After all, if there wasn’t any crime in the world what would we do for detective novels?”

“I’m going to write one of them myself someday,” Alan said as Tom started to walk away again.

“You do that, Al. Just keep me out of it.”

“Fiction is fiction, Mister D,” Alan said a bit more loudly as he and Tom parted ways, walking in separate directions. “You have yourself a cool one.”

Tom turned around briefly and threw up the same two fingers he used to salute a goodbye to Madam Louise, his jaw working the gum hard in his mouth. His slow gait was that of a man without task or trouble, the brim of his hat covering his eyes and his square-bottom tie snapping about in the light breeze as he boarded a yellow O&CB streetcar headed back for Douglas Street.

* * *

Home to Tom was now--and for the rest of his life in Omaha--a renaissance revival, three-story Tudor on 40th and Jones Street. The four-thousand square foot mansion was filled with the ornamentation his wife Sue Anne found inside a three pound Montgomery Ward wish
book: Louis XVI furniture, lush Brussels carpets, colorwash walls. On the outside, the lawn was laid with rolls of Kentucky bluegrass bordered by square-topped hedgerows, a watercress bed and a large rhubarb garden. The backyard was guarded by a five-foot tall, diamond-patterned cyclone fence and four wire fox terriers.

Tom’s domestic life operated on a strict pattern. Every morning and evening was an exact replica of the one before it.

He rose at five-thirty to the chime of his wind-up alarm clock, soaked in a scorching hot bath, dressed in a tailored Winslow velour or English cheviot suit, slipped his feet into a pair of wine suedes or oxblood Oxfords with the cool lip of a shoe horn, kissed his wife before leaving the bedroom, checked on his sleeping daughter, crept down his carpeted staircase, and slugged back a mug of instant postum in place of coffee. With a crisp morning edition of The Bee tucked under his arm, he met Harry Buford in his driveway at seven sharp to be driven to Hanscom Park where he feed the pigeons before he began meeting with his first appointments at the Dodge Hotel.

At the age of fifty-one, he was the picture of health with a lean waistline and a stout chest. He continued to practice his abstinence from alcohol and rarely ate sweets. He was still blessed with a full head of hair now nearly half-gray, the color of putty. The only ailments he ever suffered were the occasional migraine for which he swallowed pills the size of small toes, a frequently upset stomach that gave him a poor appetite, and once a month had the puss and blood lanced out of his cauliflower ear only to have it puff up to its floret appearance again in a week.

In the evenings, pardoning the rare occasion, he returned home for a family dinner at seven o’clock. Over veal stew or lamb legs or turnip salad topped with glazed cod set out on gold-rimmed china, the Dennison family ate together and the lights were out by eleven.
Following their meals, Tom often sat Francis—who was just shy of her eighth birthday—on his lap at their Aeolian piano and let her happily pound on the keys. Other times he lounged back on his armchair with a cigar and his socked feet propped up on a footrest while she played with their wirehaired terriers.

At bedtime he read her a story from one of her picture books—her favorites being *The Tale of Peter the Rabbit* and *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* from *The Jungle Book* collection that featured an embossed cover with a trio of golden elephants. On the weekends, he took Sue to millinery sales and musical comedy matinees where she dressed to the quill in sixteen-button lisle gloves, crepe weave dresses over swan-shape corsets, ankle-strap pumps, her hair piled up in waves under a coronet or leghorn hat and, in chillier weather, a brook mink coat.

On the night he returned home late from Mayor Dahlman’s speech at the train station, while reading *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* to his daughter as she lay in bed—just as he was reaching the penultimate scene when the mongoose crushes the cobra’s eggs—Francis sat up and asked, “Daddy, why did you get shot?”

Tom leaned back in his cushioned rocker at the side of her bed and closed the book after marking the spot by dog-earring the page. “Who told you that?”

“I heard mom say you got shot.”

Tom leaned forward and brushed a strand of his daughter’s hair behind her ear. “Well, now, what your mama meant was that I got some medicine from Doctor Arnold. Like in a needle, for the flu. They call that getting a shot. You remember when we took you to see the doctor when you got the chicken pox?”

Francis shook her head. “What’s chicken pox?”
“I suppose you were too young to remember that. You were two, maybe. Two and a half. Chicken pox is when your skin gets all itchy and no matter how much you scratch it, it doesn’t go away.”

“I don’t itch now.”

“Well, that’s because we got you some medicine from the doctor. Just like I got medicine from the doctor. When you get sick, you go and get a shot and it makes everything all better.”

“But mama said you got shot with a gun.”

Tom licked his lips and fanned through the pages of the book. “Your mother, she’s likes to make up stories. Like this story here,” he said and held up the book. “It’s make-believe. It’s pretend.”

“I don’t want you to die, daddy.”

“I’m not going to die,” Tom said and lifted himself out of the rocker to sit on the edge of his daughter’s bed. He put his arm behind her and leaned down to kiss her forehead. “Your daddy is never going to leave you.”

“Not ever?”

“Not ever. I’m like Rikki the mongoose. I’m going to protect you forever and you and me and mommy, we’re going to live happily ever after, okay?”

“Okay,” Francis said.

Tom kissed her again on the top of her head. “Now, you go to sleep. It’s already past your bedtime. Sweet dreams, pumpkin.”

He went to the bedroom door, turned out the gas light with a twist of a knob, and watched his daughter roll over in bed. For more than a minute he stood outside her door, peering through the lighted crack, staring at her shape tucked inside the blankets. Finally he shut the door and
stomped down to the kitchen where he took a long swig of caraway syrup for his upset stomach. He warmed some buttermilk in a stewpan over his cook stove until it was nearly at a boil, poured it in a glass, and carried it back upstairs to his own bedroom.

When he came into the room, his wife was seated in front of her princess dresser, applying polish to her fingernails with a tiny brush. She hadn’t seen him enter and for a moment Tom leaned silently against the doorframe, swirling the buttermilk in his glass as he admired his wife. Her flaxen hair was tied back with a yellow taffeta ribbon and she was dressed for bed in a long silk number whose material was so thin it was nearly transparent. After a moment Tom loosened his notch collar, swallowed half of his milk, and set the glass down hard on the dresser. He unknotted his tie and threw it into a wicker hamper.

Sue startled at the noise of the glass hitting the wood. “You scared me.”

“Uh-huh,” Tom said absently and continued to undress, removing his shoes without untying the laces and lowering his suspenders in one fluid motion. “You ain’t the only one.”

“Is something the matter?” she said and blew on her nails as if cooling a spoonful of soup.

Tom inserted himself into a flower-patterned chair and began to remove his socks. “It seems our daughter is under the impression I was shot. And now she’s worried that I’m going to die.”

“And you think that I told her that?”

“That happened over six years ago. Besides, what good does it do to fill a little girl’s head with that kind of thing?” Tom stripped down to his undershirt and began to root around in the drawers of his wife’s dresser, pulling them out one at a time and looking under the folded stacks of clothes.
Sue shot up from her taboret. “What on earth are you looking for?”

Tom didn’t respond but finally stopped his search upon finding a red-tinted bottle of laudanum. He held up in an accusatory manner, pulled the cork, dumped a long pour into the rest of his milk, and gulped it all down before it had a chance to mix. “That ought to numb me out so I can get a few winks, at least.”

“Doctor Arnold prescribes that to me for my menstrual cramps,” Sue said.

“Oh I know,” Tom said and pulled off his undershirt. “He also prescribes Guckenheimer rye for breakfast and cherry rum for boredom.”

Sue slapped him hard across his face. “Don’t you dare talk to me like that.”

He smiled, rubbed his cheek, went around to his side of their sleigh bed and peeled back the spread. “Well, if the truth is going to be had in this family with the serrated edge out, I thought I just might return a little of it your way.”

“And what truth is that? That you’re gone every day and we hardly get to see you except when your belly-up at the dinner table or holed away in your study with your nose in your papers?”

“Look, doll,” Tom said as he laid down and pulled the blanket up to his chest. “I don’t want to get in a row over this. I just don’t think our daughter needs to be fearing for her father’s life when there is nothing to fear.”

Sue tied her silk robe shut and put her hand over her mouth. “I’m afraid. I’m afraid that one day I’m going to be telephoned to the hospital and when I get there you’re going to be,” she paused, unable to even speak the word. “I have nightmares. I wake up in cold sweats and--”

“Alright,” Tom said, stood up, went over to his wife and held her at the shoulders. “Don’t go crying the buckets, now. You want me to quit?”
Sue looked at him blankly.

“All of this, the, the--” Tom struggled to find the words. “The rococo furniture, the gold wallpaper, your little silk articles,” he said and lifted the lining of her robe. “The cars in the stable, the shopping trips to Chicago, even this house, the whole damn thing, I’ll give it all up.”

“Everything we have?” Sue asked and stepped back.

“Everything we own, yeah. What’d I just say? The goddamned tea carts and cake boxes and damask tablecloths and your jewelry,” he said, yanked a small gilded drawer from her dresser and spilled its contents onto the bed: sapphire rings, gold broaches, a pearl necklace, ribbon bows, platinum earrings. “What’s all the stuffing worth to you? Because it makes me sick. I got folks who come to me everyday, widows with three sick kids, men with no jobs, nigras who can’t spell their own names or read a newspaper, all of them hungry and tired and broke and some of them homeless and they come to me because they got nothing and I got everything. And you know what? They’re the ones who end in up the hospital. They’re the ones who get found dead three weeks after the fact in some boarding house. But not me, you get it? So never mind your clown act with all the boohooing. You want to pound on me because I actually step out of the house during the day to make a living for you and Francis? Well, I’ll tell you what, you can go and saddle somebody else with your guilt.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Sue cried and swiped all the jewelry off the bed onto the floor in a mad flurry, scattering it across the room. “You think that’s what I’m talking about? Frills? You, you go to work everyday with a gun in your coat!”

Tom squinted. “Would you rather I go around without it?”

“I’d rather be a poor wife than a rich widow.”
“Listen here, now,” Tom said and wagged his finger. “Don’t you forget what you used to do. Oh yes. But never once have I brought that up. Never once. You were living in one of those cribs and making three dollars a screw and getting the rough stuff from drunk cowhands before I came along, so don’t act like I brought danger into your life.”

“You son-of-a-bitch!” Sue yelled. “You talk to me like I’m some--”

“Be careful now with what you say to me, darling. Be very careful.”

Sue composed herself as best she could, her eyes swollen from crying, her nose running, and turned to face the wall.

Tom came up behind her gently. “You want me to quit? Just say the words.”

“You wouldn’t. You like it too much.”

“It would suit me down to my shoe leather. But you can’t say it.”

Sue wiped her eyes, went into the bathroom and turned on the faucet. “I can’t help it to be scared for you,” she said over the hiss of the water hitting the basin.

Tom laid back down in bed with three pillows under his head and his hands folded across his stomach. “Last week some kid got killed by a train. They say he was nine years old. Him and his little buddy, they were picking up wood off the railroad tracks. The other kid lost his arm clean off above the elbow. Then just the other day in the papers I read about a newsie who got knifed on Leavenworth in broad daylight. Some feller stole thirty cents from the kid, so the kid fights back for it, and the guy stabs him right in the gut. This two blocks away from the police station. Kid died in the hospital over less than a half a dollar. Then there was that actress, what’s her name, from the Orpheum? She was the lead in ‘The Red Mill’ we saw that one time? Well, she went and drowned in her own bathtub. And that’s not including all the usual corpsery, the auto accidents and the damn streetcars going off their wires and the--”
Sue came out of the bathroom, drying her hands with a pink towel. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

“I’m telling you that bad things happen all the time. It don’t matter what you do for a living or your age or any other.”

“And that’s your way of making me feel better?”

“No. It ain’t. It’s just the way things is and there’s no sense in worrying over what you don’t know,” Tom said and rolled over in bed. “A man can die at anytime. That’s the sad facts, doll. But filling our daughter’s head with all the dread of the world is something we don’t need to do. She’ll learn it for herself soon enough.”

* * *

Nine years ago, before the Gold Coast mansion, before marriage, in the fourth month of the new century--April, 1900--Tom returned to his Dodge Hotel suite on a balmy afternoon and found Sue lounging on a divan with her legs spread open in front of a elderly, white-bearded man seated on a stool. Her skirt was bunched up around her knees as the man lowered his head between her thighs. Before either one could utter a single word, Tom rushed the man without even taking time to remove his hat. He grabbed him by his jacket lapels and slammed him against the wall so hard that the back of his head left a hole in the plasterboard. In his fury, Tom had kicked over the stool, knocked a Tiffany dragonfly lamp to the ground, and ripped an oil canvas of a water lily pond that Sue had painted for him that past summer.

“You stupid son of a bitch,” he yelled as he lifted the man nearly two inches off the ground, braced him against the wall, and reached for the cattle knife in his belt.
“Tom, Tom,” Sue screamed and took hold of his arm before he could retrieve the blade.

“Put him down. This is my physician, Greg Arnold. He’s my doctor.”

“You’re hurting me,” the man said, his face reddening. “Please.”

Tom relaxed his grip and set the man back down on his feet. “What in the hell is he doing looking up your dress?”

“I was just giving Miss Proust here her regular checkup,” the doctor replied with shortened breath. He coughed twice, straightened his jacket and readjusted the fit of his cyclops mirror headband. “There was no need for that.”

Tom stepped back and wiped a strand of hair away from his face. “I’m sorry. It just looked like you were doing something else.”

“I can see how it might have appeared. But maybe next time you should ask first before you resort to such brutishness.”

Sue sat back down on the divan and lit a black-papered kretek. “Tom’s business usually works the other way. He mauls first and asks questions later.”

“And what kind of business is that?” the physician asked.

“The lion-hunting business,” Tom replied and made his way to his highboy model icebox. He retrieved a quart of milk from the zinc shelf and poured himself a mug full, the silver coins used to keep the milk fresh rattling inside the bottle. “Can I offer you a glass, doctor?”

“No, no thank you,” he replied and began to pack up his Gladstone bag with a few of his nostrums—an eyedropper of colloidal silver used as a disinfectant, a bottle of cure-all Pond’s Extract, an ear trumpet and a basal thermometer. In the corner of the room, on the floor next to the divan, was a two-pound bag of barley seed. On Sue’s makeup table, a wooden mortar rested in a clay pestle next to a gooseneck flask of squash-colored liquid.
“What were you looking for up there, anyway?” Tom asked.

“Gold bullion,” Sue snapped.

“I was merely checking on Miss Proust’s overall health. She phoned last week to schedule an appointment.”

“Doctor Arnold is the best in the city,” Sue added.

“What’s this?” Tom asked as he picked up the flask and felt the warmth of its contents.

“That is Miss Proust’s urine, since you are so curious.”

Tom set the beaker back down on the table.

“Don’t be so quick to repulsion. Urine is useful for many things. Neutralizing jelly fish stings, manufacturing gun powder, textile dyes, fertilizer.”

“You’re a peculiar fellow, aren’t you? Is that what this all about? Harvesting her urine? There a lot of cases of jellyfish stings here in Nebraska?”

“Tom, don’t be so curt. Can’t you see?” Sue said.

“See what?”

“I haven’t had my period in two months.”

Tom paused. “Beg pardon?”

“Yes, indeed. I didn’t want to say anything unless Miss Proust wanted you to know. Hippocratic Oath and all. The reason for my visit was due to the tardiness of her menstruation. You see, one of my many specialties is urology. You can tell a great bundle just by the color of one’s urine. Why, there are over twenty different hues.” The doctor produced a wheeled chart that detailed all the possible variations. “And each means something different. There’s chartreuse yellow, saffron, pear, chiffon, sun gold, mustard, and even a greenish tint that if one were to eat too much asparagus--”
“Alright, that’s plenty good,” Tom interrupted.

“He even had me tinkle on some of those barley seeds,” Sue said and pointed to the sack. “If it germinates, then that means--”

“Barley seeds? Did you say you practiced medicine or witchcraft, doctor?”

“It was a common practice first used by the Greeks,” Arnold replied and stepped over to Sue’s mirrored vanity table. He added four ingredients into the pestle bowl--rose petals, ginger root, milkweed, raw honey--and began to muddle them with a wooden mortar. Once it was grounded into a fine paste, he dumped two spoonfuls of the mixture into a glass of water, stirred it thoroughly and handed the elixir to Sue. “Now, as part of your bill, I am leaving you with enough of these supplies so you can make this potion yourself. Add two tablespoons of this twice a day to eight ounces of water. And make sure you mill it up until it congeals into a batter. The milkweed is a bit bitter to the taste, but it’s a natural anesthetic and an alkaloid. It will ease some of your pains and indigestion. The rose petals and ginger root will promote a healthy fetal growth and the honey should help replenish your energy and make the flavor a touch more palatable.”

Sue took her first hesitant sip. “It’s not so terrible. Thank you, doctor.”

“No thanks needed, my dear. All in a day’s work. Now remember, two tablespoons twice a day.”

Tom stepped forward and shook his hand, slipping him a fifty dollar banknote. “My apologies again for the misunderstanding.”

“Yes, quite,” the doctor said, tipped his hat, and left their hotel apartment.

For a long moment after he was gone, Tom stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, hands dug deep into his pockets.
“Well, that was nice and dramatic. Suppose that’s a side effect from surrounding yourself with all those theatre tarts.”

“And how would you like me to react when I come home to find a man with his nose nearly buried in the fur of your cooz?”

“For God’s sake, don’t be silly. He’s old enough to be my grandfather.”

“Which made it even more alarming.”

“Oh, did my Tom have a little fit of jealousy?” Sue stood up, took him by the hand and led him in front of her cinnamon wood makeup mirror. He put his arms around her waist and nestled his chin in the soft nook of her neck. When they both looked up at their shared reflection in the mirror, Sue lifted her blouse, took his left hand, placed it gently on the flat of her belly and said, “You’re going to be a father.”
Chapter Four: Soap Flakes in a Powder House

Two weeks before the recall election of Mayor Dahlman, Tom and Sue’s daughter Francis turned nine years old. In celebration, they hosted a birthday party at their Gold Coast home on a Saturday afternoon glittery with sunshine. Fifteen other children from Francis’s fourth grade class at Sherman Oaks Elementary were invited over for the festivities along with their parents. Most of them knew of Tom’s business and nervously huddled in corners of his great room as their sons and daughters played tiddlywinks on the carpet. Other kids--Milton’s son Millard and Clark McKay’s two daughters--also came over to celebrate the birthday even though they were all at least four years older than Francis.

Sue hired a whiteface clown and a Punch and Judy puppet show for entertainment. Colored balloons were tethered to the stair banister. Tom’s muscle men, wearing both cone-shaped party caps and shoulder holsters for their Colts, played a game of ring toss on the back lawn. A red velvet cake aglow with novelty candles was cut in the kitchen and divided up for the guests.

Francis received many gifts: a teddy bear, an eight-pack of Crayola crayons, a rubber bathtub duck, a bandalore yo-yo, a bisque head doll. For his part, Tom gave his daughter a two-year-old Shetland pony with a princess saddle that he led around the backyard on a slow walk as each child took turns riding it.

When the clown began his act--which consisted of spraying himself in the face with a bottle of seltzer and yanking a long string of kerchiefs from his mouth--Tom excused himself from the party to sit down with the Hoffmann brothers.
He showed Milton and Chip through the folding doors of his mahogany-walled study and motioned for them to sit on the serpentine-backed sofa. Already standing in the room was an orange-haired man in a chalk stripe suit—Morris McNulty, Tom’s personal syndicate lawyer.

“Hiya, Morris. Been waiting long?”

“Not when you pay me by the hour,” Morris replied and raised his tumbler of highland single malt. “You know, Tom, for an Irishman you sure do you have a fine taste for all things Scottish.”

“Just be glad it only goes so far as a pony for my daughter and that tiger sweat in your glass,” Tom said and handed Morris a note from his money clip, “or else I’d have a lawyer with the last name of Ferguson instead of a big Mick like you.”

“Scottish or not, that horse is some birthday gift,” Milton said after taking his seat.

“Francis is certainly becoming a beautiful child.”

“She’s a good egg,” Tom replied and scooped a few cubes into a highball glass from an ice bucket. “I see my legal counsel has already helped himself to a pour. So, boys, what’s yours?”

“Suppose a gin buck couldn’t hurt, seeing as how it’s a celebration,” Milton said.

“Whiskey,” Chip said.

Tom mixed up the fizzy pink concoction and handed it to Milt, then poured the whiskey for Chip, no ice. He plopped down in his chair and put his feet up on his desk, revealing his diamond-patterned socks. After a moment, he stirred two spoonfuls of headache powder into a glass of pineapple juice and chugged it down in one draft. “So, McNulty, what’s the skinny about Fat Finn and his OBMA pals?”

“That hog might be a squeaker, but he never says anything.”
“He still talks to you,” Tom said as if it were an accusation.

McNulty sipped his drink and licked his mustache that was as thin as an eyebrow. “Well, they ain’t budging like you hoped. They got the recall machinery running at full throttle and come next week, they’ll be out all guns blazing.”

“Not if we put our guns on ‘em first,” Milton said.

McNulty shook his head. “This is probably a conversation I shouldn’t be hearing.”

“Forget it, Morris. Barrel here is just trying to be more clever than he really is. All he’s saying is that if they’re not budging, neither should we.” Tom sighed and looked out the window to the backyard where the clown show was underway. After a moment, he removed his gold-framed spectacles, pinched a towel from a steaming bowl of water on his desk with a pair of tongs, squeezed out its excess, and draped it over his eyes.

“I asked Finn to arrange a sit down with you and Mr. Black,” McNulty said. “But Louie wouldn’t talk to you for all the green in Ireland.”

“Of course he wouldn’t. He thinks he’s being careful, but he’s really just being sloppy,” Tom said and peeked out from under his towel after hearing a heavy knock on his office door. After a moment three more men--Clark McKay, Harry Buford, and Tom’s brother John entered his office.

“Hello, boys,” Tom said and waved them in. “Thanks for coming.”

“You need anything else from me?” Tom’s lawyer asked as the men filed into the room, sweating through their shirtsleeves from their game of ring toss in the backyard, grass stains on their summer trousers.

“No, Morris. Thanks,” Tom said and swiveled around his chair.
“Just don’t do anything I can’t get you out of,” Morris said. He donned his hat and finished the last slug of his drink. “The best lawyers never have to go to court.”

“Everything aboveboard.” Tom smirked, flung his towel back into the bowl and picked inside his ear with his pinkie finger as his lawyer said his farewell and left the office. After he was gone and the door closed again, Tom took his feet off the desk and sat forward. “Gentlemen, get any of that birthday cake?”

“We hear you have some business for us,” Tom’s brother, John, said.

“A little blood work,” Tom replied.

“An eye for an eye, eh boss?” Milton said.

Tom motioned for his men to form a circle around his desk. “That’s right, Barrel. We are outmatched in nearly every facet of this fight. And make no mistake, this is a fight,” he said and picked up a folded newspaper off his desk. “Like this morning’s edition of The Herald. Have any of you seen today’s headline?”

Their blank expressions told Tom they hadn’t, as he expected.

“That’s okay. Allow me.” He opened the paper, cleared his throat and read the article word for word to his men:

Recall Forces To Take Back City

by Josiah Willard

Not long ago, Omaha City, as it was first called, was nothing more than a river valley with one little cabin, residence of A.D. Jones. His family being the lone occupants in this city, it was safe to say Mr. Jones ran the town as he, his wife and four children were its only population.
Now, some fifty years later, dear old Omaha has grown into a major transit hub of the Midwest with a census well over two-hundred thousand and still only one man rules at the top. Some know him more casually as “Pickaxe” or “Boss Tom,” but whatever sobriquet he may go by, it is becoming less and less of a secret that Thomas Dennison and his political machine are the kings of Omaha.

Perhaps the most apt alias for Mr. Dennison is that of “Lord of the Grafters,” as his policy shops, brothels and gaming dens have filled our streets with violence and vice that knows no bounds. His power dominates not only in the third, fourth and fifth wards, which remain his breadbasket, but extends over all the city from the river bank to the western edge of the prairie. In little more than fifteen years since his arrival here from Colorado, Mr. Dennison has acquired a force that allows him to decide which thieves and outlaws are welcome in town. He is the banker, life-insurer and lawmaker for thugs of every rank and employs a gang of marginal crooks known in some circles as “The Grey Wolves” to carry out his bidding.

When it comes to crime both small and large, including everything from petty crimping to murder to ballot stuffing, his say goes in this city. Such political and physical puissance is unmatched in comparison even to the likes of Richard Croker in New York’s Tammany Hall, a man who cannot order his guns with the same abandon as Mr. Dennison. He exploits municipal loopholes, wayward police officers and even elected officials as if he were operating a legitimate business no different than a corner grocery.

Still, hope remains that his felonious crown will soon be knocked off his head and that hope is Louie Black, lone elected hero of the fight to take back this city from the vice elements that currently control it. With the continued support of the decent and dutiful public, we may once again return Omaha to the good people who call it home rather than the outsider political
boss who has taken nest here only to mire it in filth, sin and blood. So to you, dear and honest reader, I urge you as a fellow citizen to pledge your allegiance to Louie Black in his plight to purge this city from Dennison’s corruptive hand.

Every voter in Omaha, even many who voted for Mr. Dahlman three years ago, share in the responsibility to reclaim this city from its invisible government. Already sixty-thousand have signed the recall petition because they have knowledge of this city’s history and hope for its future. So on July Twenty-Second, take it as your personal duty to go to the polls and cast a “Yes” for the recall of Mayor Dahlman and remove political bully Thomas Dennison from behind the curtain.

After finishing the reading, Tom removed his spectacles and clipped them back inside his breast pocket.

“Hey, I didn’t know we had a name,” Chip said. “Since when are we ‘The Gray Wolves’? That’s aces with me. We’re the real McCoy now.”

“That’s hardly the reaction I was hoping to solicit from you. Some muckraker accuses you of being a penny-for-hire hatchet man and you’re tickled pink?”

“C’mon, boss. What’s that itsy spot of mud going to do us?”

“What won’t it do? I don’t think you fully realize the implications of Mr. Willard’s articles. This little bit of print is ten times more damaging than if they would’ve raided every single one of our businesses every night for a month straight. But I’ll be goddamned if some newspaper dwarf boy thinks his ink can ransack my livelihood.”
“You thinking of paying this Willard fella a little visit?” Milton asked, tipped back his
coster cap and spit into a cuspidor through the gap in his two front teeth.

“Willard’s a problem for sure. But he’s not the only one.”

“Just tell us who, where and when, boss,” Milton said.

“You don’t have a problem with this, do you John?” Tom asked his brother.

“Not in my life. The way I see it, a man needs to protect what’s his.”

“Good. We’re all square then.”

“They’ll be expecting retaliation,” Harry Buford said, who was off-duty, dressed in
plainclothes.

“I know it, but the worst reaction to this would be to take a powder. The moral boys in
this town want to see if I scare easy. Well, they’re going to get their answer soon enough.”

“And either way blood ends up getting spilt in the end,” Buford said.

Tom furled his brow. “What’s with you? Don’t you understand? Everything that anyone
has, that anyone has ever gotten or had taken away from them in this life, in this country, comes
from might or a lack of it. And I ain’t about to be bullied out of what’s mine.”

* * *

1898. A year of innovation and change for the whole country. Heroin was sold by the
Bayer corporation as a cough suppressant for children. Mauve was the most popular color in
women’s clothing. The Boston Beaneaters won the national league baseball championship and
the first automobile was built on American soil, a Winton Stanhope with ten horsepower. Seven
months later, races were held in major cities all over the country with cars reaching top speeds of
twenty-seven miles per hour—a breakneck pace that wowed the imagination of the whole nation. The average wage was twenty-two cents an hour. A hamburger and cup of coffee cost ten cents. H.G. Wells’ science fiction novel about a Martian invasion of earth, The War of the Worlds, was published to great acclaim and quickly became a bestseller. Willie Sims became the only African-American jockey to ever capture the Triple Crown and President McKinley signed the Newlands Resolution, officially annexing the Hawaiian Islands.

It was also the year Tom met Milton and Chip Hoffmann, the bare-knuckled prizefighting brothers from Louisiana. That February, Tom took a trip to New Orleans to watch the elder brother, Chip, lose a thirty-round fight on which he had placed a considerable, nineteen-hundred dollar wager. Chip fought valiantly against a much bigger and more experienced opponent, lasting a great deal longer than he was favored to, carefully picking and dodging punches.

After the match was over, Tom entered Chip’s dressing room—a corrugated metal shanty—not far from the outdoor ring. He found the fighter alone, sitting on a bench stool. Bare-chested and still wearing his belted tights, he soaked his left hand in a bucket of melting ice. A scarlet mess ran out of his broken nose and down his chest with no apparent want on his behalf to stop the flow.

“That was one hell of a show,” Tom said, standing on the opposite side of the room. He was holding a long black garment bag and hooked it on a corner piece of metal that jutted out from the nook.

Chip snorted and licked the blood off his lips. “You must not come to many of these things. That was a disgrace. I haven’t won a fight in two years.”

“You didn’t need to win. Not for my purposes, anyhow.” Tom said and tossed him a white paper bag. “But seeing as how you’re not much for making any kind of run at the title, I
thought you might be interested in something that doesn’t require you getting your skull smashed in once a month.”

Chip took his left hand out of the ice water and opened the bag. Inside was a large sum of loose money, heavy as a sack of apples. “What’s this?”

“You lasted thirty rounds when common knowledge said you’d only go ten at the most. I don’t call that losing.”

“Yeah. What would you call it, then?”

“Defying expectations.”

“Who are you? Don’t want to talk to any more promoters.”

Tom picked up a white towel off a folded stack on a nearby table, walked over to Chip and handed it to him. “Do I look like a promoter?”

“Yeah. Just like one, actually.”

Then--as if an act timed perfectly in a stage play--Chip’s brother Milton, who’d also been in attendance at the fight, entered the locker dressed in a tailored, three-piece suit with a shawl collar, satin button facings and a cyan blue tie. “Look at me, brother. Don’t I look snazzy enough to attend a debonair ball?”

“You mean a debutante ball,” Chip said. “Christ, you must be the only person in Louisiana who’s lost more of his brain to the fist than I have. And yeah. Look at you. You look like a costume penguin.”

Milton tugged on his lapels, stretched his neck. “Make fun all you want. I think it’s dapper. This man gave me three-thousand dollars cash to go along with it.”

“And in that bag there is another three,” Tom said. “Those are my personal winnings from your surprise performance. I’ve always been a man who bets against the odds. And I’m
willing to do it again with you. Consider it your hiring bonus.” He pointed to the garment bag.

“Size 42 jacket with a 36-inch waist and a long cut sleeve, right? And it’s chestnut brown, your favorite color. So go on and shower up and get dressed. And get that nose bandaged. I don’t want you bleeding all over this brand new suit. It was hand-tailored in Omaha.”

“How do you know my measurements?”

“The same way I knew you’d go at least twenty rounds against a man who usually knocks out his competition in the first six,” Tom replied and began to make his way to the door. “I’ll be waiting for you outside. But don’t be long. Milt, don’t let your brother lollygag. We got a train to catch back to Nebraska that leaves in an hour.”

“Nebraska?” Chip hollered as Tom exited the locker. “What the hell is in Nebraska?”

The third man Tom recruited--Clark McKay--was an Irishman and shell game artist. They met while Tom was taking one of his morning walks and noticed a sizeable, noisy crowd on the corner of Nicholas Street. It was a frigid, crystalline morning in late March. Icicles hung from store awnings, a gelid wind blew flags taut, trails of drained snow clouds fleeted east towards the bluffs. In the middle of the gathering was a man with a blaze of thinning red hair and a camelhair coat kneeling in front of an upside down cardboard box. On the flat, upturned surface he worked three large walnut shells around in a frenzy--spinning and shifting them in rapid circles. People held dollar bills aloft in the air, placing bets.

Tom knew the game well, for he too once had a gift for sleight-of-hand. The gamble--choosing which shell of the three contained a small pea--was not a matter of luck or keen eyesight, but a simple swindle. After observing the man work the crowd and having some of his shill men win a few rounds, Tom stepped forward and placed a large fifty dollar bet of his own.
“We got us a big spender here. Big spender,” the man announced in an auctioneer voice as he shuffled around the shells. His accent was a mix of Ulster English and junkyard slang. “Fifty big ones to see if his eye be faster than me hands. Step right on up and see if you too can win. One in three chance. One in three. Best odds of any game in town. Round and round they go. Rabbit quick. Keep your eye on the walnut with the pea. Eye always on the pea,” he continued and finally stopped moving the shells. “Now sir, tell me which shell be your choosing. Which is the lucky hold? One, two or three?”

Tom put his hand to his chin. “Neither.”

The man looked up, confused. “Neither? You gots to pick a shell, boyo. That’s the name of the game.”

“The pea is in your left hand.”

“Bullocks. You seen me put the piece under one of these here walnuts. It didn’t just disappear into thin air. Pick, man.”

“I did pick. I pick your left hand. Open it. Or turn over all three shells. If there’s a pea under any one of them you can keep my money.”

“You crazy or what, pal?”

The crowd began to mumble and disperse, sensing the rig.

“I asked to see your hand. Now show.”

“You are plum mad. You losing me my business. My hand ain’t a bloody option. You gots to pick a shell.”

Tom swiftly reached over and grabbed the man by his left wrist. He squeezed it hard until the man gave up his grip and there, in his palm, was the pea he’d first placed under a shell but in
the frenzy of the shuffle had covertly transferred out as part of his ploy. “Looks like I guessed right.”

At that, the two shill men rushed forward out of the crowd and attempted to seize Tom, but before they could, he withdrew his Colt Rainmaker from his belt holster. They backed away quickly and the remains of the crowd scattered at the sight of the gun. “No need for any rash behavior, boys. I just want a word with your friend here.”

Clark put his hands in the air. “Hey man, you can have your money. Like you said, you guessed right. Boys, give this man his winnings.”

“I don’t want my money. Now look, I don’t have a mind to shoot anybody this morning. It’s too damn cold for gunplay. I just want a quick chat. So tell your two friends to split and I’ll holster this canon.”

The man nodded at his accomplices. “Go on, boys. Do like the man says,” he said and they turned away down the sidewalk. “Not too far now, though.”

After a moment, Tom holstered his pistol. “I tell you, for a thimble rigger, you sure got some fast hands. I almost didn’t catch you pull it out.”

“So you know the game?”

“Know it? Damned near invented it. Now, if your life’s passion is to tote around those walnut shells and that grungy box from corner to corner, just give me the say-so and I’ll let you walk off to whatever alley you want to occupy next. But if you think you might be up for something that doesn’t require you to keep nuts and peas in your pockets, you might want to hear what I have to offer.”

The fourth man Tom asked to work for him wasn’t even a man, at least not by age. His name was Harry Buford, a fifteen-year old Negro immigrant who worked in the Chinese cleaners.
on Howard Street where Tom regularly sent his wardrobe. In one particular wool suit that he dropped off to the laundry, Harry checked the pockets before the washing and found thirteen-hundred dollars in the trousers. He called the number on the coat tag to report the money. The man who answered on the other line was Tom himself. When he entered the laundry shop, he approached the counter and asked to speak with the person who’d found the money.

“That’d be me,” a varnish-dark teenager said. A faint, ashen line of attempted moustache growth dotted his upper lip and his coarse black hair was stuffed under a knitted Coppola cap. He rifled through the contents of a desk drawer and slid an envelope across the counter which contained the found funds.

Tom counted out the cash in front of the young man--two five-hundred dollar bills, a one-hundred dollar bill and ten twenties. Sucking furiously on a toothpick, flipping it back and forth in his mouth with his tongue, Tom took his time in considering the young man’s disposition and appearance. The uneasy silence lasted until the young worker asked, “Is something the matter?”

Tom reached out, grabbed Harry’s hand by the wrist and placed half of the money in his palm. “You go on and keep this half for yourself. What’s your name, son?”

Startled by the gesture, it took him a moment to reply. “Harry.”

“Harry what?”

“Harry Buford.”

“Well, Harry Buford, do you enjoy working here, in an laundry?”

“I enjoy anything that pays me, sir.”

“Forget money. What gives you pleasure?”
The young negro pursed his lips. “I do like the look of them new automobiles I seen in the papers. Even saw one in person last week parked right outside the shop. Would love to drive one of them.”

“Is that right? Well, consider this your last day of cleaning suits. From now on you’re an automobile driver. My driver. How does that sound?”

Harry pocketed the money and cleared his throat. “I don’t know how to drive.”

“Anything worth doing takes some learning. And you’ll learn quick.”

“Not saying I don’t appreciate the offer, but you don’t even know me.”

“I know you’re just about the most honest person I’ve met in a long time, which is a lot more than I know about most people. Never heard of man returning that kind of money to a person. Never in my life. Probably never will again. So, go on and get your things. You start your new job today.”

The fifth and final member of his gang, unlike the first four, was not gathered by a matter of happenstance, but correspondence. In the spring Tom sent a telegram to Provo, Utah, and three months later his eldest brother, John Joseph--whom he hadn’t seen in nearly a decade--arrived in Omaha on the first day of summer via a mail-delivery stagecoach. He’d traveled all the way from the basin of the Wasatch Range near the Idaho border. For the past few years, he’d worked as a cattle runner on many ranches throughout the corn belt before moving out further west like much of the country to pursue his fortune in gold and silver. When he stepped out of the coach, Tom was quick to comment on the thickness of his beard and the grain sack slung over his shoulder bearing his few meager possessions.

“Brother, you are in desperate need of a shave and a proper piece of luggage,” he said after giving John a welcoming hug.
“A bath, too. And a woman. Or two women. And money. And my three missing teeth,” John said as he pulled down his bottom lip to show the dark grout of his gums where three of his teeth were now just vacant indentions. “Lord knows where or how I lost ‘em. And, while I’m thinking of it, a steak dinner with whipped potatoes and okra would be good. And money.”

Tom smiled. “You already said money.”

“Right, well I need that doubly bad. Your cable mentioned something about a handsome salary, so here I’s am. Ready and willing.”

Tom paid all five men an equally substantial salary and each was more than willing to carry out the grunt work he assigned them, be it collecting campaign contributions from other illegal businesses or selling copies of The Bee down along the riverward. He enforced a strict dress code, requiring that his men were always clean-shaven and combed with closely-clipped fingernails. Every Monday morning at eight sharp, Tom met with all five of his men at Herman’s Café on Leavenworth Street where he addressed the coming week’s concerns.

“All that I ever ask of any of you is to be on the square with me. Honesty and communication will go a long way to your health and wealth,” he had said to them on their first breakfast meeting together in the fall of 1898. The Hoffmann brothers sat to his right, Harry and Clark to his left, and at the other end of the table was his brother John, each of them enjoying a hearty morning meal of charred ham steak, milky grits, soda bread, and fried eggs that Tom put on his own tab.

As he addressed his crew at that initial gathering, his eyeglasses drooped at a slant on his nose as he shuffled through the pages of The Bee’s morning edition. “You boys need to be on the square with each other as well. Get to know one another. I’ve not known the pleasure of family in long time, not since my very first years as teenager. But having my brother John sit with me
here at the same table in more than a decade has rekindled that pleasure inside me. I think it best that we treat ourselves as a kind of family. I’ve never been a man for rules, but when it comes to running a smooth operation, there need be a few. I’ve spoken with each of you in private about my expectations. So if you can’t abide by that, now’s the time to say so. I don’t want to find out somewhere down the line you’ve been sneaking in rounds with a working girl or getting lubed up at some tavern across town thinking I won’t hear about it.”

Tom stalled and folded his newspaper. He tapped the end of an unlit cigarette on a matchbox. He slurped from his coffee after pouring a thin stream of cane sugar from a cylindrical dispenser into the mug and stared at the men, giving them ample time to respond. Finally his brother John cleared his throat. “But no liquor or women at all? Are we running a missionary or a bunch of gaming dens?”

“That’s precisely why none of you will indulge in such activities. We are running the show, not participating in it. The best dairy farmers don’t drink their own milk, they sell it. In that regard, I hold myself accountable to the same standard.”

John chuckled. “Like hell you do. Every night you are planted at a table.”

“And have you ever once seen me take down a pot? I am not gambling. I am losing. On purpose. I’m not asking for piety. I’m asking for you to stay focused on our business. This whole country is in the middle of a recession and I’m paying you better than you can find anywhere else. So if booze and bosoms and blackjack are so vital that you can’t abstain from them in favor of good pay, then you can go back to scouring mountain lakes for flecks of silver and keep your laundry in an oat sack just so can tip back a jar of lightning or take a ride in a hussy saddle whenever you get enough scratch to afford it. If that’s the way you want carry out your days, don’t let me be the one to stop you. But if you want to work for me, that’s what you are going to
do. You are going to work. For me. You don’t have decide right this instant. Finish your breakfast. Drink some more coffee. But by the time you leave this table,” Tom said, tapping the wood, “it’s either yes or no. And once you say either, there ain’t no going back on it.”

* * *

Sunday in Sheelytown: a Polish neighborhood jammed into the damp hole of South Omaha. Twelve blocks of tired pink houses with combined kitchens and chicken coops. Iron huts with exterior walls each painted a different color. Blankets instead of curtains. Front yards were cabbage gardens. Stoves on front porches. Five-and-dime stores with split-level windows and sagging roofs, selling hospital-sized jars of mustard, five-pound boxes of marshmallows, canned tomatoes. Sausage shops with kielbasa hanging like tassels in smeared windows. Lunch stands equipped with coffee urns and gas plates served thirty-cent spaghetti dinners, and beans. The sky was leaden, the color of guncotton. Catholic churches on every other corner. Most worked in the stockyards: chockablock rows of wooden-fenced corrals surrounding abattoirs were hogs were stamped into ham, suet boiled into tallow. Between Vinton and Elm street, everyone spoke Polish, wore velvet hats. Grasshopper sparrows lined up on telegraph wires, an aviary chatter hour.

Further out, on the skirt of the floodplain that was Little Poland, Tom Dennison and Edward Rosewater entered the Golden Hill Republican Club without an appointment. Sitting on one-hundred acres of land and home to the state’s first golf course where men drove gutta-percha balls with hickory wood clubs down long fairways of short-clipped zoysiagrass, Golden Hill was
a private fraternity of the most elite and devote Republicans of which Edward Rosewater had been a founding member.

He and Tom arrived both wearing their Sunday best: Tom in a slate gray suit and a pistachio green silk shirt, Edward in a vermilion morning coat with a magenta Ascot tie. They breezed through the front parlor towards the piazza that overlooked the seventh green where four of Golden Hill’s most prominent members--Louie Black, J.J. Donahue, Finn O’Malley, and Byron Boyd, the previous mayor of Omaha before Dahlman swiped it away from him--were lounging on wicker settees around a bistro table, sipping Benedictines and quinine water.

“Whaddaya say, gentlemen?” Tom said as he approached through the arch-roofed patio. “Fancy this. Four Republicans drinking liquor at ten o’clock on a Sunday morning. Never in my life would I have guessed that.”

Louie Black--president of the club, city director of traffic, and head of the recall movement against Mayor Dahlman--rose from his chair. Besides owning over half of the remaining breweries in lower downtown that didn’t belong to Tom, he also held more than a hefty percentage of three diamond jewelries and The Hotel Boutique, one of the finest auberges in the city. On paper, he was ever inch Tom’s equal. In the papers, he was a moral soundboard against the very types of businesses in which he secretly harbored more than a vested interest. Walleyed and fidgety, outfitted in an orange necktie and watch chain, his face was a sketch of deep wrinkles, his voice hoarse from a recent bout with bronchitis.

“How did you two get in here?” he asked, hands on his hips.

Tom gestured behind him. “Through the front door.”

“Fifteen percent of this club is still mine,” Edward said. “Or have you forgotten?”
“Oh yes,” Louie said, as if recalling something from a great distance. “The donkey in elephant’s clothing. Or is it the other way around?”

Tom tossed his hat on the table and pulled up a chair without invitation.

“Make yourself at home,” J.J. Donahue--the former police chief--said.

“Find a new job yet, J.J?” Tom asked. “I hear the Sarpy county squad is looking for a green one to walk the night beat at the foot of Twelfth Street.”

“What class,” Byron Boyd, the former mayor, said as he spit a string of tobacco juice into a toleware cuspidor at his feet. “Believe it’s too early in the morning for insults of that stripe even if I am drinking.”

“It’s no wisecrack, fella. And I’m sorry that I have sprung you without notice, but this is a matter of business that couldn’t wait.”

The men stared at Tom in disbelief. The hollow clicking sound of wooden club head struck tree sap ball in the distance. Edward pulled up a chair next to him, Louie once again took his seat, and a waiter in a white waist apron came to the table to gather Tom and Edward’s drink order.

“I’ll have a demitasse,” Tom said and produced a chrome-plated cigarette case.

“Suppose I could stomach whatever everyone else at the table is having, thank you,” Edward said.

“Benedictine and tonic,” Fat Finn said as he raised his highball glass. “The perfect cure for the collywobbles after an indulgent night.”

“Still teetotaling, eh Tom?” Louie asked.

“Still piggybacking every social reform issue on liquor, eh Louie?” Tom snapped.
“You’ll have to forgive Tom,” Edward replied and patted him on the shoulder. “He gets anxious when it comes to politics. But he’s a straight-shooter, I’ll stand by that. All five and a half feet of me.”

Tom sat forward in his chair and clenched his hands in his lap. “Anxious isn’t the right word. Neither is your height. You certainly aren’t no five and a half, Ed. But enough with the social niceties. I don’t wish to waste any of your time, so let’s get down to brass tacks.”

Louie--with a mouthful of melon and setting the rind of his cantaloupe down on the table--replied, “If wishes were butter-cakes, beggars wouldn’t go hungry.”

“Sorry?” Tom said and pointed at his cauliflower ear. “I’m a little deaf.”

“You heard me clear enough,” Louie said. “It’s only an expression. Look, Mr. Dennison, you are a man who apparently appreciates blunt talk. So listen close. My friends and I are not so fond of the kind of businesses you and Edward have chosen to make your hay with. Swindling working men out of their hard-earned money. Loose women running around in your clubs in nothing but their petticoats. It’s distasteful.”

“Are you talking about my perfumeries?” Tom joked.

“Make quips all you want, but you know damn well that without your bordellos and grafter houses you wouldn’t be sitting here at all.”

“I could say the same for you,” Tom said.

Edward’s face colored. “And what of my newspaper? You know good and well that I run nothing but a clean business. Why, The Bee is on par with the great printing houses of New York and--”
“Oh yes, Eddy. We know all about your paper. But truth be told we are not impressed with your yellow journalism, nor your braggart enthusiasm for a bunch of pages riddled with more slant than fact.”

“Why! I never in my--”

“So,” Tom spoke loudly over Edward’s voice, “you’re telling me that if I made my living mending farm fences and attended St. John’s every Sunday that you might let the air out of your recall petition?”

Louie squinted. “That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

“And you don’t think your jewelries and hotels aren’t chock full of such knavery? What do you think goes on in your rental rooms? All prayers and clean bed sheets, I’m sure. And what of all those stones you peddle in your gallerias at a fifty percent mark-up? You telling me that is a swindle so different than letting a man try his luck at some piddly crap table? No, you can go on spinning your racket as some holy twist, but no matter what you call it, we all know what it really is.”

Donahue stamped out his cigar butt in the ashtray. “You certainly are a little flippant for someone who needs a favor.”

“Gentlemen, let’s start over. We just got off on the wrong foot is all,” Edward said. “Surely we can have a discussion with some amount of--”

“Is that so?” Tom interrupted again. “Mr. Black here was the one who called me a beggar and then had the nerve to judge me because I run a few gaming dens, as if his jewelries and hot-sheet hotels are as white as lamb’s wool. Not to mention that slur against my friend’s newspaper. That’s three offenses you barked at us in less than five minutes,” he continued, raising three
fingers. “Even so, I’m willing to overlook all of that. We didn’t come here to compare the gauges of our moral compasses. We came here to discuss a business deal.”

“Business?” Louie asked. “Or politics?”

“What’s the difference?”

Louie paused to consider the facial expressions of the men around the table. “I can’t remember, boys. Have we ever had a Democrat step foot in this club?”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Tom replied. “And us walking through your door is step one. Forget party politics for a moment.”

“Forget party politics?” Boyd said. “Don’t you know where you are?”

“With all my respect, Byron, you and your little demimonde here wouldn’t be anything than more than a pack of tinhorns if it wasn’t for the laxity of certain laws, myself included.”

“Now he’s insulting us,” Donahue said.

“No, I’m educating you. Same thing goes for Edward,” Tom said and patted Rosewater on his shoulder. “He can go on trumpeting up his paper just like you could go on about your stocks and fancy clubs, but where do you think he gets the money to buy his ink? Or you your delivery trucks? Whores and gamblers. That’s simple fact. So don’t try and deny it,” Tom said and stirred sugar into his metal-framed coffee cup. “You want to risk all that come next week because you’re so fixed on the Republican brand? It might have worked in the past, but that is all about to change.”

“How’s that?” Louie asked. “You going into the palmistry business now, too?”

“Well, let’s say you get Dahlman out of office. Lord knows you got a fighting chance. But then November rolls around and you’ve got another battle entirely. And it certainly doesn’t take a fortune teller to see that you’ve got yourself a three-way race for your party’s run at the
office. Benson, Moores, and Cushing.” Tom said, raising a finger as he listed off each name.

“Each of them will siphon off votes from the other. And we all know what Benson has planned if he gets his way. A nice, unbiased cleanup of all things in a glass that aren’t milk and all weekend activities that don’t involve going to church.”

“Which is exactly the issue,” Louie interrupted. “Gospel is losing out to jazz, cards are more popular than worship, married men are bringing syphilis home to their wives. The moral fiber of this city is crumbling.”

Tom grinned. “Morals haven’t slumped, friend. Folks have always been bad. They’re just starting to figure out who they really are is all.”

“And what about Moores?” Boyd asked.

“Moores couldn’t draw a crowd to a room if it was wallpapered with hundred dollar bills,” Tom replied. “So maybe you want to go on putting all of your eggs in Cushing’s basket. Be my guest. But for a bunch of conservatives, you should know better than anyone that just because you can buy an oyster for a cent doesn’t mean you purchase six dozen a day. Right, Finn?”

Finn tapped the left side of his nose with a fat finger. “Keep making fun. I’ll bend you a clean one across your schnoz just like I did to your boy Lapidus.”

Tom laughed and stuck out his chin. “Go on and give it a try, counselor.”

“What exactly are you proposing here, Tom?” Louie asked. “If this is what I think it is, you’d have a better chance selling sex in a nunnery.”

“And you won’t be selling sex anywhere if you don’t come to your senses.”

“I’ll be dead in the cold ground before I vote Democrat,” Louie added, inching forward in his seat.
“You might as well start digging your plot, then. Your party is split and it’s inevitable. In six months another Democrat will be sitting in the mayor’s seat whether you like it or not. Your little war in the newspapers is losing traction. Plus consider the fact that three years ago you lost the race even with a solid party favorite. You know why? Because men who are eligible to vote like to fuck whores and drink whiskey and play at games of chance. They also like the fact that voting for the party that gives them those things can also give them a job for their vote. And we all know how the darkies will notch their ballots. Add all that up and what comes out on the other end?”

“The same shit I squeeze out of my ass every morning at six o’clock sharp,” Louie said.

“That’s a funny one,” Tom said without a hint of laughter. “A real funny one.”

“You do realize you are asking the most rigid group of Republicans if there ever was one to vote for a Democratic rodeo clown?”

“I’m not asking for your vote. I’m asking you to call off your dogs.”

Louie paused and scrunched his brow. Tom, not wanting to press too hard on the issue, let them sit in silence for a moment. Out on the nearby green, three golfers dressed in matching goldenrod sweaters putted towards a wind-bent flag staff marking the hole. Tom drained the last of his coffee and examined a hangnail on his thumb, waiting for a response as one of Louie’s mistresses—a young woman who barely looked eighteen years old with a dainty physique, high-boned neckline and coral-colored lip rouge—came over to the table after emerging from a dressing room. She bent over, put her arms around Louie’s neck and, removing her tiny hat pin, carefully stuck a lavender gillyflower to his jacket lapel.

“The shoe shiner’s waiting for you, dear,” she said after sizing up the carnation to make sure it was on straight.
“Thank you, sweetie,” Louie replied and pecked her cheek.

She smiled and left as all six men cordially stood from their chairs.

“Now there’s a beautiful woman,” Tom said. “Woman like that, you could stare at her until you grew cornstalks on your eyes. Where did you meet her? Don’t suppose it was at Sunday mass or a Republican rally.”

“You know I can’t give you what you want,” Louie said.

Tom lit another cigarette and shook out the match with a flick of his wrist. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not badgering you. I met my wife in a brothel. But I’m trying to give you some sound advice here. I’m sure every one of you at this table can remember the days when you reached into your pockets and felt nothing but lint. You want to return to that?”

Louie sighed, waved for the waiter, and ordered a mass of brunch items for the whole table: poached eggs, Mumm’s champagne with chilled orange juice, baked Alaska with salmon mayonnaise, another kettle of coffee, sweetbread, and meringue topped with lemon glaze.

Tom whisked a fly away from his face. “Call off your recall petition and there are three things I can promise you. First, J.J. here will be reinstated on the force. Not chief, but a captain at the least. Second, every business of mine north of Douglas Street will find five percent in your pockets just for waking up with a smile on your face. How you divvy up that pie is your choice. As for you, Finn?” Tom turned to the fat lawyer. “Judge Swan is retiring at the end of the month. You present your commission to the district court and you will find yourself the new incumbent of his office.”

“A judge at last,” Edward added and nudged Finn in the stomach as his face blushed with sudden pleasure.
Tom continued, “For you Louie, well, I heard you made quite a nice little sum off those screwy sewer contracts you gave out to your pals last winter. That’s the kind of money you can’t earn. So, how would you like to be head of public works come January? Not just sewers and roads anymore. But railroads, bridges, hospitals, schools, municipal buildings. That’s a lot of public capital to be dished out as you see fit.”

“And no one looking at how much you skim off the top,” Edward added.

Tom shrugged his shoulders. “Which goes without saying.”

“That’s four things promised,” Louie said after a stunned moment. “Not three.”

“Well, all the better for you,” Tom replied and put a napkin over the top of his coffee mug.

“How do we know you’re not just painting zebra stripes on a mule?” Finn asked.

“You’re the elephant,” Tom said—a slap at both Finn’s weight and his political party of the week. “You figure it out. Or have I got to furnish all the brains in this city?”

“And come the primaries,” Louie said, “every caucus will be held in a saloon.”

“Still hung up on your paper morals?” Tom asked.

“There are some things you just can’t buy,” Louie replied. “And this is one of them, I’m sorry to say.”

“You think about it for a day,” Tom said.

“Thank you, Tom. But I already said Thank You and No,” Louie replied and offered his hand for a departing shake. “But despite our differences, I hope we can continue to be civil towards each other in the future.”

Tom stood up and replaced his sweat-stained bowler on his head. “Of course you will do what you feel is in your best interest. But consider this. Say by chance you do wrangle another
Republican into office. If it does happen, my money’s on Benson despite all of your efforts to promote your boy Cushing. Just let that protestant get a stranglehold on the city for a couple years.”

“Whoever it is will do what he’s told,” Louie said.

“Maybe. Maybe not. But I know for a certainty Dahlman is the willing type. He could be on your half, too.”

“Well, it surely is something to think about carefully. We thank you for your visit,” Louie said emptily and offered Tom his hand for the second time.

Tom refused Louie’s gesture, patted him firmly on the shoulder and said to the table, “You all enjoy your brunch, now.” He left the veranda, pulled on his doeskin gloves, and hailed a Hansom cab parked under the club’s canopy. Edward, much more concerned with cordialness, lagged behind for another Benedictine and quinine to smooth over the rough with his old friends.

* * *

Omaha was a canvas of feathered ice and graupel for much of the previous winter. That February alone the city had received twenty-three inches of snowfall that had to be shoveled into the back of flatbed trucks and driven down to the banks of the Missouri where it was dumped like trash. The streets were checkerboards of blue slick and skidding cars. Windows and water pipes froze. Skim-ice formed on birdbaths, hoar frost clumped on barren tree limbs. Blizzards came equipped with sudden and rare bolts of winter lightning. Children ice skated on sidewalks, rode trashcan lids and giant oven sheets like sleds down the enamel of frozen hillsides. For an entire week in the middle of the month, the mercury never rose above ten degrees. The nights
were brighter than the afternoons. Many families stopped buying ice from the delivery trucks to save a weekly nickel, kept their milk and hamburger cold in their sinks.

On the day after Saint Valentines, late in the evening as flurries fell in fat wet patches, police chief J.J. Donahue led forty-five of his officers out of the second precinct livery yard. A collection of roundsmen, sergeants and mounted horse patrols poured out of the building wearing their newly designed uniforms--highcollared wool coats, flat-topped custodian helmets, slim black neckties. They scattered into five separate flanks once they reached the intersection of 14th and Farnam.

It was half past midnight on a Sunday. The streets were dark save for the dim flicker of lampposts and an orange moon. Police boots and horse hooves clapped over the macadam streets covered in old patches of snow. They were armed with jacklights, broad axes, blue steel revolvers and marlin exposed hammer shotguns. Some wore copper knuckle dusters and holstered foot-long truncheons in their belt loops.

Each of the five units dispersed to their separate locations across the third ward. Every group of nine officers was headed by a deputy sheriff and, as they waited to move forth with the plan, their horses whinnied and snorted frosty air. Finally, at the stroke of one o’clock, each brigade charged forward into the business they were assigned, bursting through front doors without warning. Some of them used their axes to splint wood from hinge. Others simply opened the knobs as casually as if they were entering their own homes. The largest gambling raid in the history of Omaha had officially begun.

Wanting to make a splash, Donahue planned to, as he put it: “Wipe out the dens of sin and vice that plague our great city with the same gusto and verve that those illegal operations are operated themselves.”
Two weeks before the raid, he held a public address on the front steps of the Douglas County courthouse to over three-hundred gathered citizens and multiple reporters. He promised a renewed vigor to cleanse Omaha of its filth—everything from the pornographic penny arcades to illegal gaming coves to the brothel taverns that kept working men awash in liquor and solicited sex.

“In the last month alone,” he had proclaimed in browbeating fashion, “we’ve added twenty new policemen to our ranks in an effort to deliver our great city from the hands of grafters and thieves and place it back where it belongs with day laborers and upstanding businessmen such as Louie Black. It is my goal that in the coming year we will also hear new sounds in the streets. Let us replace the noise of gunfire and drunken hysterics with that of hammers and saws and children playing safely without the fear of danger.”

He dubbed his campaign the “Hammer and Saw Barnstorm”—a catchy title which graced the pages of *The Herald* at least three times a week. When he brought his proposition of gutting the most prolific of these dens in one fell swoop to Louie Black’s attention, Louie was quick to divulge the addresses of five such places—each of them belonging to Tom Dennison.

As the police battalions flooded the grafting houses, men seated around faro tables and spinning roulette wheels scrambled for the exits in a flourish. The police wrestled down attempted escapees while other officers, with their revolvers and batons drawn, turned over card tables and smashed rows of liquor bottles. They were all instructed by Donahue himself to “error on the side excess rather than modesty.”

They shattered bar mirrors with the butts of their rifles, shot chandeliers down from the ceilings, collected loose money and betting chips into large flour sacks, broke chairs, kicked in doors, smashed slot machines until they ruptured coinage, chopped open wooden barrel kegs and
casks with their axe blades. Suds and spirits of all colors gushed out, soaked into the carpeting
and wood, paneled towards floor drains. They confiscated the contents of cash registers and
arrested every man present in those dens--bartenders, blackjack dealers, prostitutes and common
patrons alike--and loaded them into the back of their patrol wagons.

When Donahue was confronted by the manager of *The Happy Horseshoe*--one of Tom’s
high end saloons--he told the man his business was being raided for violation of the Blue Law,
which prohibited the sale of liquor on Sundays.

“You goddamned crackpot copper,” the manager yelled as his hands were bound in pair
of manacles. “You can’t enforce that. It’s Saturday night.”

Donahue flipped open the face of his timepiece to show the manager and said, “It is
currently seven minutes past one a.m. on Sunday. Which makes all liquor sales in this
establishment illegal by state law.”

“And what gives you the right to wreck this place from kingdom come? Huh? This tavern
is privately owned.”

“I am well aware of the man whose name is on the lease, thank you. And let me assure
you, he holds no influence over the law. So you can save your comments for him. This is not just
a tavern, sir, it is also a gambling den and, unlike alcohol, gambling is illegal no matter the time
or the day.”

“Says you and your high hat.”

“Says the State of Nebraska,” Donahue replied as the manager was hauled away by a pair
of officers.

By night’s end, the windows of each raided establishment were shuttered with sheets of
plywood nailed to the wainscoting, the doors were barred with padlocks, some three-hundred
gallons of alcohol was spilt to waste, and over ten-thousand dollars was sequestered from the registers and banker safes—all of which occurred while Tom slept soundly in his sleigh bed next to his wife, unaware of what had just befallen five of his most prominent properties.

The following morning, a gelid Monday of ash-dark skies and forecasted thundersnow, Donahue invited ten members of the press to police headquarters to see his take from the raids. The newspaper boys, dressed in their clawhammer jackets and knockabout overcoats, huddled shoulder to shoulder in the police chief’s office with their short pencils wagging against their nickel notepads. Donahue displayed a cache of seized weapons laid out on his desktop: sawed-off shotguns, semi-automatic pistols, revolvers, slipjoint knives, canoe blades, billies, and even a bundle of dynamite sticks whose match cord fuses had been soaked in banana oil to produce a timed explosion after lighting the wick.

“One night’s harvest from the goons of this city,” Donahue had said as he waved his hand over the weaponry as if it were merchandise for sale. “All of it taken from gamblers, hired thugs and hangers-on around illegal saloons and houses of ill fame.” He picked up one of the two sawed-off shotguns, cradled it with both hands as if it were as heavy as an elephant tusk, and said to the press gang: “It’s called an ‘auto and burglar’ gun. Its reduced size allows the criminal to conceal it inside his coat or in a drawer behind a bar counter. We took this from a doorman at a harem on Thirteenth Street. He told us he kept it on his person to protect the women who worked there.”

“So you and your boys made a pretty decent dent last night, eh?” one of the reporters blurted out, pencil raised in the air like a schoolboy with a question.

Donahue shook his head solemnly, his jaw muscles working but his mouth closed as if his speech were halted by pain. His eyes were red around the rims. Before responding he lit a
cigarette, drawing hard on the plum until it crackled, and tossed the matchbox back down on his desk. “We are just starting to scratch the surface of crime in this city. It is maddening. I go to bed at night quaking at the thought of what might be happening to the third shift boys walking their beats.”

“What about more policemen?” another newsman asked.

“If we had five thousand policemen we still couldn’t enforce the gambling and prostitution laws as they stand.”

“But you say you arrested over a hundred violators last night?”

“Yes. Like seizing soap flakes in a powder house,” Donahue replied dryly.

“Is it true that mayor asked for your resignation because you said the law is not enforceable?”

“If Mr. Dahlman of Texas,” Donahue said, still standing behind his desk, “would have been a resident of Omaha for more than a year before he got himself elected he would not act that way. If he didn’t have sordid business interests in the same vice that currently runs roughshod throughout many of our downtown wards, if he did not owe his current position to the same criminal organization that we fight against everyday, he would know the history of this city better than he does and he would not be trying to force me out of office for taking action against those very same elements that put him on his pedestal and line his pockets.”

“That’s a pretty heavy accusation against the leader of this city.”

Donahue tossed a handful of shotgun cartridges on his desk. “The truth often bears such weight, I’m sorry to admit. But Mr. Dahlman is not the leader of this city. He has abdicated that position to Thomas Dennison.”

“And what think you of him?” called a reporter from the back of the office.
“Do you know Mr. Dennison well?” asked another.

“The mayor invited me to dinner a couple weeks ago because he had a friend he wanted me to meet,” Donahue said and pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. “This friend was an exceedingly polite and well-groomed gentlemen who the mayor introduced to me as Thomas Dennison. Not ten minutes at the table I discovered that Mr. Dennison had one of the sharpest minds I have ever encountered.”

“That sounds like an endorsement.”

“I also discovered he is a businessman for whom politics is a hobby. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with that expect that his businesses are the very same ones we raided last night,” Donahue said and waved his hand over all the seized weapons on his desk again, “and his interest in politics only goes so far as he can corrupt it to protect those illegal businesses.”

* * *

Two weeks before those Sunday night raids--police chief Donahue was invited to a dinner at the Dodge Hotel by Mayor Dahlman. Waiting for them at their reserved table was Tom Dennison in his diamond stickpin and tailor cut suit of silver cloth. Their dinner conversation--over a meal of steak tartar with shirred eggs, steaming tureens of turtle soup, candied yams, chickpea salad, spearmint tea, iced dishes of sorbet--never veered into politics. Throughout the hour, seated next to a roaring stone fireplace, the three men discussed the grandeur and awe of the county’s newest obsession--the monoplane, their shared dislike for the punitive reportings of The Daily Republican, the overbuilt railroads causing each other to go bankrupt, and the beauty
of Tom’s hotel until at last dessert was finished, cigars extinguished, and they stepped outside through the hotel kitchen’s back door.

Together they climbed a stone stairwell that led to a steam-filled alleyway. A light winter drizzle was falling over the city. Huddled over a bin fire were three panhandlers wearing oilcloths for snow coats. A dirty mustard glow from a single streetlamp illuminated the flurries in the air. As the three men came out onto 15th Street between Dodge and Farnam, they walked to the front entrance of the hotel. Tom’s Columbia was waiting on the curve, rubber wipers slicing mist from the windscreen glass, Harry Buford at the wheel.

“How about a lift home, Chief?” Tom asked and opened the backdoor for Donahue as a brisk wind lifted old snow off the ground.

“Much appreciated,” Donahue said and folded himself into the tan upholstery next to the mayor.

Tom took up the front seat as Buford shifted the gear level to drive them six miles outside of town to Donahue’s family farm on Buffalo Road. The ride passed largely in silence, pneumatic tires spinning up slush the entire way. Tom sagged down into his seat with his feet kicked up on the dashboard, crossed at the ankle.

As they pulled into Donahue’s long driveway, Tom exited the car along with him and popped open a tri-colored umbrella that rather belonged stabbed into the sand of a beach and not as a snow shield in a Midwestern February. Donahue’s gable-roofed farmhouse sat on twenty acres of fallow grassland with a feed lot of wire fencing, pig troughs as long as church pews, and a timber-framed byre at the back of the property. Mayor Dahlman stayed behind in the Columbia with Buford as Tom walked the police chief to his detached garage shed.
“Thanks so much for the ride and for dinner,” Donahue said and extended his hand. “It was mighty white of you.”

Tom shook it hard. “No thanks needed,” he said, took an envelope of money out of his jacket pocket and fanned through the bills. “But there is one bit of business I hoped to run by you before we say goodnight.”

Donahue, holding his own black umbrella, stared at the money blankly.

“This city drastically underpays its good police. Especially its good administrative police. What do you make annually? Sixteen-hundred?”

“I pull in thirteen and half.”

“Not that it’s any of my business, of course,” Tom said as snow pellets sang out on his umbrella, “but that kind of chintzy salary for the men who risk their lives every day to ensure the safety of our community is another problem entirely. And one I want to address personally. The violence we’re having right now in this city will look like a catfight between a couple of chanteuses on a dance floor compared to what will happen if things keep going the way they are. And I got just the plan to remedy that, but big things start with small gestures. So, from now on I’m supplementing your paycheck.”

“Supplementing?” Donahue asked with a tilt of his head.

“Doubling it, I’d should say. That is, if you are a man who understands that good business is discreet business.”

“I don’t like secrets,” Donahue said. “Or backroom deals.”

“No secrets. We’re not in a knitting club. But I’ve had my share of welchers and hopheads let me down over the years because they didn’t understand a simple principle--a fool with money is still a fool,” Tom said and wagged the bills in the air.
Donahue followed the cash with his eyes.

“How big is your family, officer?”

“Got me a wife and two young ones, both girls with a third on the way.”

“That’s a big unit for a man your age. And possible upgrades to your farm here? A new barn, maybe? Fresh paint. Expansion for more bedrooms. A fenced-in backyard for your children to play safely,” Tom said, put the banded stack of money back in the envelope and handed it all to the chief. “That should cover the bulk of it.”

Donahue peeked in the envelope. Inside were seven banded thousand-dollar stacks. He’d just been handed an amount that would take him twenty years to save on his own. His hands began to shake and his eyes watered. Speechless, he held onto the envelope so tightly that that Tom joked he should have the cash stitched inside his jacket lining.

“Don’t look so shattered,” Tom said. “Just make sure that money finds itself in your family’s pantry and not on the felt of one of my snooker tables.”

“I don’t gamble,” Donahue said. “But this is too much. I never imagined having this much money in my whole life, let alone having it dropped on me in one night.”

Tom grinned, pulled a twisted Italian cigar from his pocket and lit it with the crackle of a match. “Relax. I would have blown on it other fellas who already have it. But now it’s yours and you’ll make better use of it than any of those suckers.”

Donahue, after a hard moment, handed the envelope back to Tom. “I can’t accept this. I don’t gamble, but I don’t take bribes, either.”

Tom refused to take the money, keeping one hand on his umbrella rod and the other buried in his pant pocket. “What does seven grand buy me from a man like you?”

“I’m not for sale.”
“What would you like, J.J.? What price would settle you?”

“I can’t accept any price,” Donahue said, forced the envelop back into Tom’s hands and turned towards his garage door.

“Well, we’ll just see about that, won’t we?”

“I don’t like being bullied, Mr. Dennison.”

“No one does. But this isn’t bullying. It’s a lucrative offer.” Tom tapped the envelope against Donahue’s chest. “This a hell of a lot of money right here. All you have to do is scoop it up.”

Donahue hesitated and wiped his brow.

“You are an ambitious man. Chief of Police at the age of thirty-five. Your own family farm to maintain. A wife and three children to provide for.”

“Ambitious enough.”

“And you are politically ambitious, no?”

“Not politically,” Donahue said. “There’s no room for politics when it comes to running a police force.”

Tom chuckled. “There’s politics in everything, sonny boy. Everything from the price of a loaf of bread to what team wins the world series. And if you think there ain’t politics in police work, you’re the only one in all of Omaha who don’t.”

After a moment, Donahue replied, “I understand that you and the mayor are chums, and that he is my boss. But one boss is enough. I don’t need two.”

“You are confusing friendship with ownership,” Tom said.

“I have obligations to run a safe city, which is more than enough task for one man no matter how ambitious he might be.”
“If it’s too much for you to handle, maybe you ought to resign.”

Donahue stared hard at Tom.

“You have the full support of our city’s government,” Tom said. “But you know as well as I do that the law in not enforceable in a city of this size. We don’t need to clean the streets. We need to educate the people and it’ll take two or three generations to educate folks about the evils of gambling and prostitution.”

Donahue shook his head. “That’s a nice theory. But I’m up against a condition and not a theory. I wasn’t appointed police chief to see that the third or fourth generations of the future are educated against crime. I am police chief for the year 1909, not 1970 or 1989.”

“You can’t make people good by enforcing laws,” Tom said and shrugged his shoulders. “Or we Americans would all have been saints long years ago.”

“This city is already full of good people. And I owe it to them to do what I was elected for, not what you can afford.”

Tom sniffed the air. “This city is full of good and bad people alike.”

Donahue turned away. “Goodnight, Tom.”

“That’s alright, J.J. Do what you want.”

“I aim to,” Donahue said and disappeared into his garage.

* * *

The morning of the special recall election--July 22, 1909--dawned silver and pink. A roll of storm clouds threatened overhead, but never split their seams. A rind of sun squashed between thunderheads in the low summer sky. Two hours before the polls opened, at the Pennyworth
Gentleman’s Club, James Dahlman took the podium in front of an audience of six-hundred of the city’s wealthiest bluebloods for an early morning rally. Tom was seated at the head table next to Billy Nesselhous and George Lapidus as Dahlman approached the platform dressed in a pair of rattlesnake skin boots and a white Stetson.

A member of the crowd yelled at him to take his hat off, to which Dahlman replied, “Is that what concerns you on this day? Let me tell you, a cowboy might not remove his hat indoors, but, by golly, he will never lose his shirt, either,” which drew a chorus of murmurs from the audience.

“And let me tell you something else,” he continued. “I ran away from home when I was fifteen years old. I worked in the fields a few years with my brother and I can tell you this--far too often, hard work promises very little in return. But I can assure you gentlemen a different kind of promise today. That same kind of hard work will return us all profits if I am to continue my duties as mayor of this fine city. Yes, I am a cowboy. But Omaha needs a cowboy’s workman-like mentality to get us through these hard times. Now is our moment to keep this city away from the Republicans who have run us into nothing but debt and--”

“And does a cowboy know how to write a veto message yet?” another heckler yelled out.

“In my three years in office, many a proposition has found its way onto my desk that wasn’t in the best interest of the people and I simply wrote ‘No way, no how,’ scribbled my signature, and that was that. I don’t know how other politicians might do it and frankly I don’t care to.”

After the Pennyworth Club, Dahlman was escorted to platforms all over the city, spending the whole day on the stomp with a new engagement for every hour: the Flyman Body Plant, Fontenelle Club, and Sons of Italy before lunch; the Prague Hotel, Brandeis Department
Store, and the Old Fellows Hall in the afternoon; the Third Ward Democratic Club, Jewish Voter’s Club, and St. John’s church in the evening.

As morning colored the bluffs across the river, the newspapers wielded their last stabs in a month-long knife fight. Edward Rosewater threw his support behind Mayor Dahlman in the Omaha Bee, writing, in part:

“Any rational citizen, before rushing off to judgment or to the ballot, must pause to ask themselves logical questions. Who are the leaders of this reform? Are the Republicans, my fellow party members, unprejudiced in their motives or do they have political axes to grind? Is there motivation that of public welfare or of political power? If we citizens are honest with ourselves and shed off our party affiliations in favor of rational thought as I have, it is easy to see that James Dahlman’s record is not only an impressive slate, but a clean one. As long as I have been a Republican leader in this city, never have I publicly or privately endorsed a Democrat for office no matter the competition. But this is no fair fight. It is mutiny. And when you are standing in your voting booth today, do as I will and vow your support for our leader against these recall forces seeking to purge him from office by marking ‘NO’ on your ballot.”

At eight o’ clock, as the sky blushed and stars disappeared, over ninety polling stations opened across the city in a variety of locations: schoolhouses, hotel lobbies, taverns, tanneries, restaurants and private homes. Four branches of the Omaha National Bank closed their usual counter business so their metal tellers’ cages could be used as voting booths. American flags flapped in the breeze atop conical towers and were draped over the avenues, tied between lampposts with twine.

A vista of the over-thronged streets: men in sport shirts and duck trousers, women in summer blouses. Factory workers with goggles pushed up into their hair, toting their lunch kits
and tucking wads of dip into their lips. Husky Irish foot police passed out handbills. Butter-and-egg men in straw hats and stiff shirts. Children with pinwheels and glossy lollipops. The entire mass moved like floodwater down the sidewalks that sloped towards the Missouri river. Storefronts--soda fountains, drug stores, chop suey restaurants, single-floor garages--were placarded with posters of Mayor Dahlman in his cowboy hat. Milk wagons, sedans, and taxis idled on curbs for their quarry like moored riverboats waiting for granite and limestone.

Streetcars ushered full loads of folks--some standing on the runner boards, others sitting on the bumpers--all the way from Caldwell Block to Fort Street. Men in white trousers working behind soda water stands dispensed glasses of lemon phosphate to the surging crowds. Traveling snake oil showmen sold swamp root and pepsin gum and electro-galvanic body belts in front of marmoreal hotels, hoping that the increase in foot traffic would fill their coffers before they packed up their mule buggies and moved on to the next town.

Into the lunch hour, Tom’s crew worked as handlers who chauffeured repeat voters from one station to another. In many of the third ward pool halls and saloons that served as polling places, free pours of whiskey were offered in return for a ballot against the recall. By noon, a number of men had cast so many votes that they were staggering drunk. Others were offered betting vouchers that could be used in any of Tom’s gaming dens. Men who neither drank nor gambled were given boxes of peaches, sweet potatoes, ham shanks, canned beans, and apples to take home to their families.

At the end of the day, not more than an hour after the polls closed at sundown, every single wooden ballot box was wrapped over the top in wax paper and sealed with a licorice stamp to prevent ballot stuffing. Yet many of the boxes housed in Tom’s wards were also equipped with false bottoms that could slide open. Before they were delivered to the offices at
the courthouse for the final count, Tom’s men used those trapdoor sleeves to shove in even more fake votes without breaking the official government seal over the top.

As midnight neared, the first numbers began to come in over the wire. In the first, second, and third wards the numbers were remarkably slanted towards Dahlman: twelve-thousand votes in his favor against just under a thousand opposed. The rest of the city’s tally was a tinge closer, but the final count still had him favored by over twenty-two thousand total marks--a landslide that could not be surmounted no matter how many more votes were counted by the new hours of morning.

The election night party celebrating James’s victory was held in Hanscom Park at 32nd and Woolworth. The mayor took to the second level of the main pavilion, but his victory speech was not one of celebration. Rather, he focused his attention on the September primaries were less than six weeks away. Paper lanterns were strewn in the tree limbs as part of the décor and, in the middle of his address, one of them burst and sent a cottonwood ablaze. Within minutes the fourth district fire battalion--a steam pump buggy toting cotton-covered hoses--arrived on the scene. A crew of eight municipal firefighters, outfitted in bucket hats and rubber gumboots, began to unwind the hoses and douse the tree.

Tom was outfitted in a beige three-piece with a carnation in his top buttonhole and a porkpie with a white band. His hair was matted to his forehead with sweat. He rolled down his sleeves, buttoned them at the cuffs, loosened his belt one notch, pawed at his forehead with a handkerchief, and watched the firemen work their hoses.

A voice behind him said, “This won’t be the only thing in the papers tomorrow.”

Tom turned: Harry Buford was dressed in full police uniform, his blue coat starched to a rigid stiffness. It was the first time he had seen his driver all day.
He shook Harry’s hand and looked again at the firefighters battling the smoking remains of the tree. “Speaking of news, how did your drive out to the farm go this morning?”

“All’s taken care of,” Harry said.

“I’m surprised I haven’t heard the whispers yet.”

“Or the screams,” Harry paused and turned his attention to the cowboy waving his Stetson on the pavilion balcony. “At least the mayor lives to see another day.”

“Which is more than I can say for a couple other boys.”

“He don’t look much like a mayor with that damn stupid hat,” Harry replied, took an apple out of his pocket and picked off a piece of lint from its skin.

Tom scratched his chin and lit a filtered Sobraine, holding it between his ring and pinky finger. “People love politicians who don’t look like politicians.”

“Well, you’d know better than anyone when it comes to that, boss.”

“One thing I did hear is a lot of your fellow blues got the Paxton all sealed up.”

“They’ll be sniffing around that place for days,” Harry said.

“Don’t you worry. If any of this comes back on someone, it comes back on me.”

“You expect them to give you some trouble?”

“They’ll be hot to start, but we’ll see how long that lasts,” Tom said. “Let me know if you hear anything through the grapevine.”

“Anything for a concerned citizen,” Harry said and began to make his way back towards the street. “Unless there’s something else?”

Tom pulled a envelope from his pocket. “Happy birthday, by the way.”

Harry took the envelope with a raised eyebrow. “It’s not my birthday.”

“Twenty-one is a big number. Fancy that, you turning old enough to vote today.”
“Right. Bet you would like to know who I voted for,” he said and opened the flap. Inside was a thousand dollars. Harry tucked it inside his jacket.

“Yeah, out of curiosity, who did you?” Tom asked.

“Mr. Dahlman, of course,” Harry said with a smile. “Four times. Once for me and three others for each of our departed friends.”

* * *

Earlier that same morning, come the drowsy crowing of cocks, three murders were carried out in the pale of dawn:

Josiah Willard, clad in horizontal-striped pajamas, sat on a camelback divan in the lobby of the Paxton Hotel, twisting out cigarettes into a standalone ashtray, sipping orange tea from a moustache cup, and reading the day’s first print off of his story in The Herald urging voters to recall Mayor Dahlman–his ninth such article on the subject. The hands of the gilt edge clock above the checkout desk marked the time as ten minutes to six. The hotel lobby was a tall atrium of overstuffed sofas, a stone fireplace gone cold for the summer, spills of yard-sized Oriental rugs, amber marble, cathedral glass. On the wall above Josiah’s head was a painting of a pack of timber wolves in a silvered forest, their snouts pointed in a communal howl at a thumbprint of acrylic moon. A young liveried bellhop in a pillbox hat stood sleepily in front of a bank of dormant birdcage elevators. Outside, an overnight windstorm that had uprooted young trees and snapped electrical lines was slowing to a stiff breeze.

The Paxton was constructed of tan loaf brick with marble parapets and a pair of revolving doors beneath a slab of marquee hung with suspension wires like a lowered castle drawbridge.
Five minutes before the hour turned, two men entered the lobby dressed in rubberized trench coats, deerskin gloves, rollbrim fedoras, and bandanas covering their faces like train robbers. They paused to wipe their shoe soles on a carpet rug and scan the atrium before making a direct line towards the lounging journalist: newspaper hiding his face, his left leg crossed with a feminine daintiness at the knee.

Ten minutes earlier, a tingle on Josiah’s suite telephone informed him that his favorite morning treat--the boxy and cherry-haired Miss Julep--was available for that last slanted hour of operation before the goodness of the day was to begin in earnest. The voice on the other end of the line belonged to Madam Louise from The Berryman Club. Riding the draw cord descent of the grated elevator in his nightwear down to the lobby, Josiah stepped outside to the hotel curb and paid a newsboy dressed in tan coveralls and a square paper cap for the first copy of the morning edition off his bundled stack even before he had unloaded it from his bicycle cart. He then took up the same divan of the same corner of the lobby he’d given his weight to every dawn for the past two months, a hermit of a hotel dweller.

The two trench-coated men stood before Willard without him noticing their presence and one of them asked, “Would you like an egg with your tea?”

Willard lowered his newspaper.

“Are you Josiah Willard?” asked the second man and, as soon as he did, before a response to the question could be voiced, he withdrew a pump gun and blasted Willard square in the chest with a spray of buckshot. The force of the impact sent him against the back of his divan as if his spine was sewn into the fabric. At the sound of the first shot, the bellhop standing by the elevator bank--the only other person in the lobby--ran out of the hotel through the back entrance. Josiah’s face was spotted with blowback splatter. His shirtfront pebbled with blood. Without
hesitation, the second gunman unloaded all seven rounds of his Colt hammerless into Willard’s face at point blank range. The newspaper he had been reading dropped to the floor. Unsatisfied, the assassin fit another seven-round clip into the stock of his pistol and, with the muzzle only inches away from Willard’s already desiccated face, pulled the trigger until it clicked four times on empty chambers.

Then, as calmly as one would exit a diner after paying the tab, both men left the hotel, climbed into an idling Studebaker, and coasted down Farnam Street with the headlamps off. Four blocks away, the sun still not risen, the dark Model H pulled into a private garage with a giant orange door behind Aladdin’s Drycleaners, where it was to be boarded for the rest of the summer. The two men stepped into the street, all starlight and cobblestone, dumped their bandanas and guns into an ashbin, and entered the Umbra Café as it was opening for breakfast. The restaurant was empty. Chairs stacked upside down on table tops. Thick yellow curtains pulled shut across the long picture windows. A chalk slate still bore the previous day’s blue-plate special of meatloaf, mashed spuds, black pudding, and a dinner roll.

Taking up two stools along the counter, the owner of the café greeted his first guests of the day: “Well hell. Morning, Chip. Morning, Milt. The usual again today?”

The Hoffmann brothers nodded, took down their first cups of reddish coffee and multiple cigarettes in silence. As their meals arrived—a pair of mushroom omelets they smeared with banana ketchup—the first guest of the morning back at the Paxton hotel, a slender barefoot woman in a kimono robe, came down into the lobby to order her own breakfast as no one at the front desk had answered the telephone call from her room. There was no attendant behind the check-in counter. She rang the service bell multiple times and still no one came to assist her. After a moment, she turned to head back to her suite and screamed at the sight of the body that
had slumped off the divan in the corner of the lobby: seated upright on the floor, face blown clean apart, left wrist draped over the chair arm as if trying to haul himself off the ground, pieces of brain and skull splattered on the divan back and pooling onto the parquet where another hotel dweller, a calico cat, was licking at the sticky purple mess like spilt milk.

Not half an hour later, in a small apartment above the Langford-O’Malley-Meacham attorney offices on Webster Street, Finn O’Malley was halfway through his breakfast: picnic ham, cinnamon toast, six runny eggs, gooseberry pie. A large napkin was tucked into his shirt collar like a bib. Bellied up to his kitchen table without pants, his tarlatan socks were held halfway up his bare calves by elastic supporters, no shoes. Working his fork and knife like a pair of tractor gear shift levers, a heavy knock snapped him out of his chair. Leaving the chain lock in place and peering through the crack in his door, he saw Tom Dennison—a homburg slanted over his left eyebrow.

“Finn,” Tom said. “We got a problem. Let me in.”

“I’m not decent,” Finn replied.

“When you ever been good?”

“I’m in my skivvies,” Finn clarified.

“Forget your pants.” Tom put a hand to the door. “You ain’t safe here.”

After a moment, Finn let Tom, who was followed by his brother John, into the cramped kitchen: light green walls, cream woodwork, two small windows over a sink full of dress socks soaking in discolored water. Tom took off his hat and sat down at the table cluttered with heavily fingerprinted jars of jellies and mustards. Spoon handles jutted out of the condiment containers. The first creak of daylight shot through the windows. Finn stood behind his chair in his shirt and
underwear, his moustaches twitching, and tossed his napkin onto the table. “I thought you said this was urgent.”

“Josiah Willard got plugged this morning,” Tom replied. He poured sugar out of a bowl onto a plate, sparked a cigarette, and used the bowl for an ashtray.

Finn stole a quick glance at Tom’s brother, who had walked into the cook space and lifted a putrid soaking sock out of the sink water with pinched fingers.

“Laundry in the kitchen?” John asked and dropped the sock back in the suds.

Finn stared at Tom. “I suppose you had nothing to do with that.”

Tom reared back on his chair and pushed open the yellow lace curtain on the window behind him to peek out into the alleyway: hovels of rabbit warrens, another clapboard tenement not six feet away, a cup of sugar being transferred on a wash line from one apartment to another. “I wouldn’t be here if I did,” he said. “We need to get you out of the city for a while. Somebody’s gone rogue.”

Finn snorted. “What good is it knowing you, then?” he asked, and as soon as the final syllable came out of his mouth, John threw a clear plastic bag over his head as quickly as trapping a fish in a net and pulled it tight against his neck. Finn grabbed and tugged at the bag, trying to tear through it with his fingers. It inflated and sank like a lung with each struggling breath. His mouth sucked at the plastic like a child blowing kisses on window glass. John held onto the bag with both hands at the back of Finn’s neck, his elbows tucked in against the lawyer’s spine, riding him around the kitchen as he fought and kicked like a bull out of the chute until finally Finn collapsed to his knees.

Two chairs were knocked over as John wrangled the big man to the ground. Finn reached his arms behind his back as if trying to scratch a hard-to-reach itch. With a last burst of energy,
both men were on their feet again and John, one hundred and fifty pounds the lighter, was backed into a wall with a thud. A picture frame crashed to the linoleum and shattered into three pieces. Finn’s balance didn’t last long and, as his knees gave out, both men tumbled back on the floor. John lay behind him like a spooning lover, his legs wrapped around the lawyer’s gigantic stomach.

Tom, watching with only a casual interest, knocked an inch of ash into the sugar bowl, took a final drag, and dropped his cigarette into a coffee mug. “Don’t let up,” he told his brother. “You let him go too early and he’ll just pass out.”

John kept the bag taut even after Finn’s body went limp and his chest quit heaving. Tom turned a couple of the jars on the table to read their labels--orange marmalade, guava jelly, spicy horseradish--and flipped open his timepiece to mark the time. He then set the watch on the table and reclined back in his chair with his hands in his lap. Three more minutes passed. Then four. Finn’s eyes and mouth were open inside of the bag. On the fifth minute since he quit moving, Tom rose from his seat, picked up the pieces of the broken picture frame that had fallen on the floor and stuffed them inside his large interior coat pocket. He picked up the two chairs that had been kicked over in the scuffle and pushed them back in against the table. Checking his watch one final time, he told his brother it had been long enough.

John released the bag, yanked it off Finn’s head, and stood up gasping from the effort. After wiping off the knees of his pants, he sniffled, crammed the plastic bag into his trouser pocket and found his hat on the floor by the window. Tom took the leather glove off his left hand and put two fingers to Finn’s neck to check for a pulse. He waited twenty seconds. There was none.

“Now comes the hard part,” Tom said, standing.
John huffed, fitting his hat back on his head. “I already done my half.”

Tom nodded, fit on his left glove again, and picked up the plate of gooseberry pie on the kitchen table. He smashed up a slice with his fingers until it was a paste, knelt down next to Finn’s body, lifted his head, and began to shove the pie deep into his mouth. With a finger, he poked the mashed pie down Finn’s throat until it was lodged against the back of his esophagus. Setting the plate back on the table, Tom brushed his hands together and scanned the kitchen. A baby cry issued from the floor above, the plank walls as thin as cigar box wood. Then Tom and his brother lifted Finn off the ground, each man taking an arm to hoist him to a standing position.

“On three,” Tom said, counted down and, on the final call, both men dropped the hulking Finn with his chair positioned under his body. He dropped to the floor, the chair sliding out from underneath him, and landed on his side. For a final time, Tom looked about the kitchen to make sure they left no signs of their entry. He picked his wet cigarette butt out of the coffee mug and put it in his pocket. Before leaving Finn’s apartment and locking the door behind them, he said to his brother, “Another reason you should always dine with company. You only choke to death all alone.”

Lastly, at a quarter past seven, a sunburst was spilling pink light over the soybean fields outside of town and J.J. Donahue was already up and at the day on his family farm, slopping his troughs with sorghum. He was dressed in a flannel shirt, gray coveralls with one strap hanging down from his waist like a tail, and a broad brimmed sun hat. His mornings began at five sharp, long before his wife and daughters were awake. The Donahue acreage was a bit too small to call a farm in the traditional sense: six piebald hogs, a pen of blue ducks, two horses--both three-year-old female Sorrels with handsome, copper-red coats--a small coop of hens, and one aging brown cow J.J.’s oldest daughter had name Mattie.
As Donahue finished filling the pig troughs, the morning milking of Mattie already performed, he paused for a moment along his fence line and stood looking out over his property with an elbow on a post. A line of cottonwoods and vase-shaped Dutch elms nearly forty feet tall surrounded the back of his property, rising up single file from the fields like a leafy wall. The branches of one particular elm had proved strong enough to support a wooden deer stand with a built-in gun rest where he spent whole autumn mornings staring out at the forest floor, hunting for whitetail he field dressed himself and stored over the winter in an icebox chest.

Currently, his attention was focused in the opposite direction, out at Buffalo Road which was not a road at all, but a lane of blanched gravel that rarely produced any motorized traffic and the only thoroughfare that led back into Omaha. Mist was rising from the wet fields like low smoke, the night dew burning off, when another type of smoke--that of car exhaust and a cloud of trailing gravel dust--came into view around a curve. Donahue watched blankly as the auto approached his farm house, sipping coffee from the lid of his traveling vacuum flask.

Two hundred yards out, he recognized the vehicle as a police cruiser and walked to the end of his long driveway to get a closer look, standing by his tin mailbox. The patrol car slowed as it reached the drive and parked on the other side of the narrow road. Donahue removed his hat, wiped his brow with his shirtsleeve, and spat on the ground between his clenched teeth. He could not see who was inside. The low sun and risen clouds of powdered gravel obscured his vision.

Half a minute passed before two men exited the cruiser--Harry Buford in full uniform and Clark McKay in a checkered beret turned backwards on his head in mimicry of the style he’d seen Wilbur Wright wearing the hat in a photograph taken in the pilot seat of his Flyer II at Kitty Hawk. Well-acquainted with officer Buford from his time as his commanding officer on the
force as well as from his drive with Tom Dennison that past February, Donahue greeted him with a loud hello and asked him his business.

Buford mumbled something that Donahue could not understand as both men approached with a quick gait. As they neared, Buford smiled and mumbled again as Clark walked right up to the former police chief and sunk the cleat of a framing hammer into the top of his skull in one flourishing stroke. Donahue, dazed by the impact but still alive, fell against his mailbox, grabbing at it for support. Clark stepped back two paces, leaving the claw of the hammer plunged in the top of Donahue’s head. A thick shoestring of blood ran down his left cheek. His mouth hung open, but he was unable to speak or even blink his eyes. Buford and Clark grabbed him as he collapsed to the ground—Buford hauling him by his armpits and Clark scooping up his legs at the ankles. Without hesitation, they tossed him into the backseat of the cruiser lined with a blue tarp, wrapped him up in the vinyl without removing the hammer from his skull, and drove back into town obeying all the rules of the road.

The day after the recall election, Mayor Dahlman’s victory at the polls was overshadowed as the top story in the newspapers by the murder of editorialist Josiah Willard, the suffocation of attorney Finn O’Malley, and the missing former police chief. In the days that followed, district attorney Christian Sorensen launched a formal investigation of all three occurrences. He vowed to solve not only the killing of Josiah Willard, but also the apparent accidental choking of Finn O’Malley and the disappearance of J.J. Donahue. The papers continued to report that the other two incidents apart from the hotel shooting were being treated as homicides until evidence proved otherwise.
That Wednesday, Sorensen called an emergency three-hour session with Louie Black, city commissioner Ronald Hightower, and Governor Sheldon to outline their plan for the investigation.

“These men,” Sorensen was quoted in the Thursday morning papers, “crusaders against vice corruption of every stripe in this city, are pledged to the swift and thorough resolution of the offenses that occurred on the morning of July the twenty-second. With the full support of Governor Sheldon, our state, county, and city law enforcement agencies are united to not only apprehend those guilty of the gristy murder of Mr. Willard, but also to ensure that every racketeer, gangster, and two-bit criminal in this city be brought to justice. Currently, a five-thousand dollar reward is being offered by our city council for any information that results in the arrest and conviction of those who gunned down Josiah Willard in the Paxton Hotel. That same sum is also being offered for any information leading to the safe return or whereabouts of former police chief J.J. Donahue, as well as any insight to the tragic death of defense attorney Finnegan O’Malley, as foul play is suspected in both cases.

“Furthermore, let it be known that the slaying of Mr. Willard was not only the work of the gunmen who performed the shooting. Harrowing as it may sound, they were just the killers. It is of no secret that the reason for his murder was fueled by political animosity. Far behind the guns which took his life is a person or persons who hired them to perform this heinous act. For the entirety of this last month, we have heard time and again from Mayor Dahlman that there is little to no crime in Omaha. But in light of such criminality, how peculiar does such a statement now appear in the view that all which is necessary to take a man’s life is a disagreement of opinion publicly expressed on the printed page? But rest assured, all the expertise and resources
of our police department are being rallied today and for the foreseeable future to run down these
cold-blooded killers and the men who hired them to pull the trigger.”

The district attorney’s investigation led to the detention of twelve different men, including the Hoffmann brothers and Tom Dennison. In a small office furnished with a single desk and a number of wooden chairs, lead investigator Clyde Olsen--wearing a polka-dotted bowtie and salesman tonic in his hair--conducted the examination. Three desk fans oscillated air in the stifling room, blowing streamers tied to their wire cages.

Also present: Tom’s personal defense lawyer Morris McNulty, who stood at the back of the room with his briefcase in hand, two female stenographers typing up the transcripts on a pair of clunky LC Smiths, and district attorney Sorensen. As the afternoon progressed and the same questions were asked over and over again with different diction, Tom’s responses were filled with raillery and whimsy despite being given the full thumb-screw treatment:

“How should I know what’s happened to Mr. Donahue?” he said in one reply, slumping down in his chair like a schoolboy. “Maybe he’s on his way to Egypt with all eighty dollars of his life savings. I heard he takes night walks in his wife’s pajamas. Maybe he got lost and walked all the way to Idaho in a negligee. Or maybe he got brain fever. Or kicked by horse.”

“Do you find the situation humorous, Mr. Dennison?” Clyde Olsen asked with a frown from behind his desk, twirling his clamped eyeglasses between his fingers.

“Not in the least,” Tom replied, staring at the ceiling.

Olsen referenced his notes. “You were a primary financial backer for Mayor Dahlman’s campaign in last month’s recall election, were you not?”

“How many times are you going to reword the same question?” Tom’s attorney snapped from the back of the room.
“As many times as necessary,” Sorensen replied.

“Until you get the answer you want?” Morris asked.

“The thing is,” Clyde continued, “this recent recall effort was, in part, headed by the same three men of which a murder, death, and disappearance befell them separately on the morning of that election, a curious scenario to say the least.”

Tom cracked his neck. “Here we go again with the thralldom of party politics. Tell me, have you questioned every single person in this city who made a donation to the mayor’s office or just me?”

“Please just answer the question, sir.”

“Was there a question?”

Clyde folded his hands on his desktop. “Let’s try another one. What do you know about the death of Finnegan O’Malley?”

Tom chuckled. “I heard he got stung by a wasp.”

“Did you not have a relationship with Mr. O’Malley?”

“I did.” Tom laughed again. “And it was hot and heavy, boy, let me tell you.”

“Mr. Dennison, one more remark like that and I will have you arrested and processed at county holding.”

“For what? Cracking wise?”

“Your constant jest is not doing you any favors in relieving this department of our suspicions about your involvement in these crimes.”

“Crime, not crimes. Singular,” Tom corrected him, his tone snapping serious for the first time all afternoon. “Now look, Mr. Olsen, all I know is what I’ve read. And what I’ve read, what your boss Sorensen has claimed himself.” Tom paused and pointed at the district attorney. “Is
that you have a murder with no witnesses, a poor soul who choked in his own kitchen, and a man who has gone missing and might have just as likely run off with a new woman to the moon as anything else. And I don’t know diddly about any of it. It’s a damn shame and I’m as sorry as the next man about what happened to that Willard fella. Hell, I’d even been glad to match your reward money for anyone who can help solve that crime. And I’m even sadder about poor old Finn. He was a friend of mine for many years. I was a pallbearer at his funeral for chrissakes. Something as small as piece of food taking a man’s life? It’s just impossible to put it right in your mind. Same thing with Mr. Donahue, wherever he is. Good help the family he left behind. Which is another thing I’d like on the record. I’ve personally gifted the Donahue family three thousand dollars to help them through the lean. And I’ll keep helping until the man turns up. If he never does, God forbid, I’ll keep on giving.”

Clyde leaned forward in his chair, the punching of keys from the two typists filling the room with a clacking staccato. “Would that be generosity out of guilt?”

Tom stammered angrily. “Keep on goading me all you want. But what are you planning to threaten me with next? Arresting me on charges of kindness?”

“It raises more than a few red flags,” Sorensen said.

Tom shook his head, stood from his chair, and buttoned his suit coat at the waist. “I’ve had my fill of this foolishness. You are grasping at straws over a coincidence you would like to dress up as a conspiracy to put in your papers and grab a few headlines. But if you thought about it for two seconds you would see your own folly. If I had anything to do with this nasty business, why wouldn’t I go after Louie Black? Hmm? He was the show runner of that whole recall fiasco, but he’s still upright as far as I know. If you had the horses to arrest me, you’d have already done it. So if you and mister district attorney here or any of the other heels in this office want to waste
any more of my time, you’re going have to put me in manacles first.” Tom tipped his hat as he turned to leave the investigator’s office. “Good day to you, gentlemen.”

Then, pausing before he closed the door with his lawyer trailing him in a rush, Tom turned back around to add: “Oh, and happy hunting.”
Omaha’s first nightclub, the oddly-named Orange Blue Club which was neither orange nor blue, celebrated its grand opening on August 29, 1909. Unlike the many other taverns and juke joints in the city where the only music was banged out on an upright piano with circular mug stains, The OB—as it came to be called—was an exclusive jazz and dinner lounge with a dress code and a guest list. Dennison-owned and built in the basement of a coin laundry—soap suds on the first floor, real suds in the cellar, as was the arrangement—it was also the first underground club in the city which, ten years later when state prohibition came into effect, made its conversion to a speakeasy effortless.

The club catered entirely to the city’s elite clientele. The guest list was swollen with the names of lawyers, aldermen, councilmen, prominent businessmen, and theatre stars. The main dining room—which served a French Bistro menu of items such as escargot, duck a’l’orange, baked brie and majinola ribeye on bone china plates and Moët poured into crystal flutes—led into a ballroom and casino where the only house rule was to spend money. Every night a seven-instrument band belted out swing and ragtime music that filled the dance floor. In the adjacent gaming parlor, a man could find any card game of his choosing, and long banks of plugged slot machines never failed to light up. During the hourly band intermissions, showgirls flaunted their feathers and rhinestones on stage and offered what was beneath their costumes in curtained booths for an exuberant price.

On the opening night, over thirteen hundred people came to the club with the hopes of being allowed inside. Many waited for an hour in line only to be turned away once they got to
the door. Men in silk top hats with grosgrain ribbons puffed on gigantic cigars. Croupiers raked in cash and chips across snooker tables. Waiters in white jackets served liver-dark cocktails garnished with speared maraschino cherries and submerged, dissolving sugar cubes. Showgirls necked with portly businessmen, coaxing them into buying a half an hour behind a curtained booth.

In an enclosed booth at the back of the club, the most important guest of the night--Mayor James Dahlman--joined Dennison and his two-headed brain trust of Billy Nesselhous and George Lapidus for a dinner of shellfish and shell-game politics. Filet mignons, broiled lobster tail, snow crab legs and oysters on the half shell were to be served as the entrée and Tom ordered his steak rare by saying, “I don’t want my meat pink. I don’t want it red. I want it purple as a bruise so that when I’m finished there’s a pool of blood on my plate.”

George Lapidus laughed and tucked his linen napkin into his collar. “Tom Dennison likes the taste of blood. Who knew?”

“Say, you can get a worm in your belly eating a steak that rare,” Dahlman added.

“You can get a bullet in the belly for things a lot less risky than that,” Tom replied and examined his chilled salad fork for what at first appeared to be a smudge but was really just refraction from the chandelier light. “My stomach ain’t what I’m worried about, though.”

“Something troubling you?” Nesselhous asked.

“What’s not troubling me? I got over fifty whores out of commission this month with the only French thing in this city that’s not on this dinner menu,” Tom said, referring to the recent syphilis outbreak in four of his seven harems. “I got a police commissioner who thinks he needs to raid a bunch of my stuss houses next week to pacify the drys and a wife who has spent more money redecorating our guest bedroom than Edith Roosevelt did renovating every room of the
White House. Let’s see, what else? Oh yes, I’ve got the D.A.’s investigators following me around like disciples and, to top it all off, I’ve just sunk four hundred thousand dollars into this club. So if I seem a little stressed, I am.”

Dahlman pinched the middle of his bowtie. “Every single one of your worries can be solved singularly.”

Tom forked a cherry tomato. “Do tell, Mr. Mayor.”

“With money, of course. And you’ve always had more of that than problems.”

“The mayor’s right, Tom,” George said as glanced around the dining room, admiring its vaunted elegance. “This spot here is no vest-pocket operation and the people of this city will recognize that right away.”

“You’ve always been nervous about new investments,” Nesselhous added. “But come the morning when you see the take, I think you’ll be reassured.”

“Speaking of new investments, I hope you won’t mind if I burden you with the possibility of another,” George said and paused before continuing further.

Tom dipped the corner of his napkin into his water glass and cleaned the side of his mouth. “Well then, speak.”

“I’d like to run for the senate in next year’s election. That is, with your permission and backing. Now, I know that old dog Rosewater wants it too, but something tells me you don’t want for him.” George paused to gauge Tom’s reaction, who was at least still listening enough for George to add: “Already got the slogan, Lapidus for the Best of Us.”

“If all it took was a catchy jingle,” Tom said as their dinners were delivered. He cut into the middle of his filet and, satisfied with its temperature, continued. “Which is a funny thing.
How is it that someone who wants to be senator is so ignorant that he doesn’t even know how a body gets picked for the job?”

George stared at him blankly.

“Well, how do you think we run a neat and tidy little pickup service with all the cab companies and street car firms to get a bunch of hicks and nigras from one polling place to another like we do for the mayor here?” Tom said and gestured at Dahlman. “Then come the next morning you wake up in Washington taking your oath to protect the constitution and all that jazz? Tell me, what exactly do you and all your carpetbagger chums down at the Fontenelle actually know about anything?”

George blushed and spit a mouthful of steak into his napkin. “Well if you’re going to sit there and belittle me right to my face, the hell with you.”

“Really, Tom, how many people on God’s green earth know anything about the intricacies of congressional elections?” Nesselhous asked and he cleared his throat.

Tom licked lobster sauce off his index finger, then his thumb. “Well, I do, for one. And what am I? Some bagman gambler who put a few dollars in his pockets from whores and craps tables. So I’d like to think that someone who wants to be that very thing and holds his hands out asking for it would trouble himself with the knowing of how he is supposed to get it in the first place.”

“I thought it was got by asking you,” George said, “less I’ve been misinformed.”

“Looky here, I didn’t mean to offend your fragile sensibilities. If you want an apology, you have it. What you need, though, is something different.”

After a moment of silence, as if waiting for Tom to finish his thought, George finally said, “Well, get on and tell me then.”
Dahlman chuckled at George’s eagerness, but squashed his laugh quickly in a cupped fist. Tom chewed through a piece of steak and raised his eyebrow. “A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Mayor?”

“Senators aren’t chosen by voters, they’re chosen by the legislature,” Dahlman informed the group.

“Glad to know someone else at this table is aware that I don’t run the world. And you know how legislatures choose senators? Same way auctioneers chose a buyer, whoever so puts in the highest bid, which, hear tell, is something not many folks have the pocketbook for.”

“Supposing I do?” George said.

Tom smirked and wagged his finger towards his silver mug for the waiter to pour him another spot of coffee. “Whatever happened to being a police judge?”

“I thought it might be nice for you to have a friend in the capital. You already have the city running like an engine. Why not expand?”

“It’d be nicer to have a friend on the bench. Besides, a few people would like to see me in court for doling out the very kind of favor you’re asking.”

“That’s what good lawyers are for.”

“A good lawyer is like a good bet, there’s never any guarantee. If you were a judge, I’d have a fix.”

“Listen, I don’t think I’m cut out to wear a gown. Besides, you’d have an easier time electing a lawyer to bang the mallet rather than a layman,” George said. “And I’ve got just the fella. My nephew, Charles Foster, graduated from Yale Law three years ago and he’d be the perfect candidate for police magistrate.”
Tom cracked a crab leg open with a pair of metal tongs, slid the meat out from the shell and dipped it in butter sauce. “I don’t know him from Adam.”

“He’s my nephew, like I said. A real whiz, too. Passed the bar examination on his first go-around.”

“I don’t care if he’s smart. Question is, is he smart enough to follow orders?”

George raised his hand. “I’ll vouch for him. He’s a loyal pup, just like his uncle.”

“Yes. But there’s difference between loyalty and obedience.”

“On my honor,” George added.

Tom considered the proposition for a moment and slurped down the paint-thin meat from an oyster shell. “Lapidus for the Best of Us, huh? Well, at least it rhymes, that’s a start. Might take a few nice donations on your part, though.”

George took a stuffed envelope out of his dinner jacket and handed it across the table. “Is that what you like to call it? A donation?”

“If you’re serious about being a candidate for public office, that’s exactly the word I’d use for it. But it doesn’t matter what you call it, so long as it counts right.”

“You’ve always liked numbers better than names,” Dahlman interjected after a long absence from the conversation.

Tom itched his neck. “Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. Mayor. You don’t seem to mind when it’s your name that gets printed over the ticker. Or would you rather go back to being Mr. Dahlman?”

“I think he was joking,” Nesselhous said on the mayor’s behalf.

“It was a joke,” the mayor said.
“I’m in no mood for humor,” Tom said to Dahlman and then quickly shifted gears.

“Besides, having a couple more friends in office could work out well because the county option on prohibition is coming up.”

George waved his hand at the notion. “It ain’t got a chance. Not in this city. What’s next? They going to try and outlaw fucking?”

“Funny you mention that,” Tom said. “I’ve been hearing whispers about a little something called the Albert Law coming down the pike.”

“So what if it does? You worry too much. Gambling ain’t legal, but that hasn’t detoured you,” Dahlman said and gestured to the long rows of glowing lottery wheels and spinning roulette tables not fifty feet away from their booth.

“The mayor’s right again, Tom,” George said. “Maybe it’d be a good thing for you, profit wise. Sometimes when a person can’t have a thing, they want it all the more.”

“And pay more for it, too,” Nesselhous added.

“I thought you were the one blowing your horn about me going legit?” Tom asked. “I’m almost fifty years old and profits aren’t as valuable as peace of mind.”

George sipped from his champagne flute. “You know, stress will kill you if you let it. You need to unwind. I mean, look at these beautiful women working for you. They’re the best remedy in the world for easing nerves.”

Tom wiped his hands together, brushing off crumbs. “I don’t care if Daisy Green popped out of a milk bath in flesh-colored tights this very instant, I don’t cheat on my wife. That’s the difference between me and you. Tell me, how can you vouch for your nephew to be a loyal pup, as you say, when you go off your own leash to other doghouses twice a week?” he said and stood
from the table, his plate only half-finished. “If a man can two-time his wife, he can do it to anyone.”

“But, Tom--”

“I wasn’t finished. Don’t get weepy. If I only let monogamous fellas into politics, this city would be run by altar boys. So you go on enjoy yourself some cooz tonight, on the house. I’ll let you play senator, but I want to sit down with your nephew before I decide on him.”

“I’ll set up a lunch for next week,” George said.

“You should know I haven’t ruled out Rosewater for the position yet, either.”

George sighed. “What are you telling me?”

“I thought you and Edward were kaput?” Dahlman said. “I knew you should’ve given him the hard good-bye a long time ago.”

“And that’s why this conversation never leaves this table. Edward’s no use to me dead. If I’m running both sides, I get to pick which one wins.”

“I thought you said that was the legislature’s job?”

Tom slid the envelope of money George had given him into his interior tuxedo pocket.

“What do you think this is for?”

* * *

Listen to the soft rain: fall had arrived with both feet. Early October and already the mornings were chilly with oily fogs and wrinkled skies. The September primary had come and gone, Dahlman a gargantuan favorite for reelection in ten out of the city’s fifteen wards. A scent of brittle leaves and hearth smoke blew through the air. Late season bugs swarmed in the glow of
arc-style street lamps. A smear of gray clouds, messy as split paint water, was illuminated by
moonlight. More exactly: the fifth day of the month and, through the sizzle of the mizzling rain,
the candy-orange glow from the headlamps of a Columbia saloon car appeared on the horizon,
cutting through the autumn mist on the Great Platte River Road, heading south from Omaha to
Lincoln.

Officer Harry Buford gripped the steering post as the auto rumbled over the plank road
that possessed little more craftsmanship than a wooden sidewalk. In places it was smoother,
paved with macadam. In others it was hardly a road at all, washed up with liquid sand that
spattered out from under the fenders like a continuous sneeze. Tom was in the front seat, his eyes
droopy with sleep as it was not yet five in the morning. George Lapidus and Milton Hoffmann
occupied the back bench--George working gum in his mouth like a cow with a cud, Milton
snoring as loudly as a congested giant, his hands tucked into his armpits next to his holstered pair
of .38 Colts that rode against his rib cage everywhere except a shower stall.

The trip from Omaha to the state capital in Lincoln took a little over an hour, even with
no traffic and Buford gassing the Columbia at its top speed. Out on the Platte River--a braided
cord of water a quarter of a mile wide and less than a foot deep in spots--three men readied a flat-
bottom punt for an early morning of fishing for gizzard shad. A pale road of moonlight streaked
over the water. Fog rolled through the tall switch grass and clouds were as low as the Columbia’s
bumper. They followed the river all the way south to the capital, the precise destination being the
governor’s mansion on the edge of H Street in Lincoln.

They passed several ghost towns where abandoned flour mills were gutted to their
structural bones and sod houses sagged in on themselves. They stopped to refuel in Waverly next
to a dairy farm as the first sliver of sun began to boil away the morning mist. Spotted cows with
clipped horns were lined up in stanchions, pails waiting beneath their udders. Stave silos and grain elevators stabbed the sky. To the west, cylindrical bales like giant rolls of carpet dotted the sodium-gray alfalfa fields.

Once in town, they zipped through the empty streets--a flash of color and steel passing by long storefront windows not yet open for business. Buford was smoking his tenth turf cigarette since getting behind the wheel and he lit the end of his new squares with the butts of previous ones--never a breath drawn that didn’t swallow an aromatic pull of tobacco. His fingernails were as long as a woman’s and Tom noticed them as he put his newest cigarette to his lips.

“Good Lord, Harry. You need to trim them sons-of-bitches,” Tom said.

“As soon as I get hold of a pair of scissors I’ll have ‘em down to the quick for you, boss,” Harry said, his cigarette leaking smoke as he made a tight left onto Garfield Street where a man in serge wool trousers and suspenders without a shirt was pulling a wheeled cart of chickens on a string. “Where to up here?”

“Just keep following this south towards the center of town,” Tom said, put his Homburg over his face, and relaxed down into his ample cowhide seat. Beyond the stretch of the town square--where squat retail buildings advertising cold meats, ice milk and laundry soap gave way to salt marshes rimmed with shadscale shrubs and commercial feedlots fenced with chicken wire--the tall rotunda dome of the capital building came into view on the horizon. Without letting off the accelerator pad, Buford careened the Columbia onto a ruddy thoroughfare that was little more than a path trampled down with wheel indentations made by previous automobiles.

On a hillock, set back in a clump of hickory trees heavy with walnuts ready to split, the four men saw the governor’s mansion--its blistering white paint like a block of contained light tucked deep in the green tufts of the hickories. It was a three-story, Georgian Colonial affair with
sash windows five across on the top floor, a wrap-around porch, and paired chimneys serving as architectural bookends. As the Columbia inched forward onto the pea gravel drive covered with rocks pearly enough to decorate an aquarium bed, Buford cut the headlines, then the engine. For a long two minutes Tom sat hunched over in his seat, staring in at the house. He’d made an appointment with the governor for that day which wasn’t scheduled to meet until eleven. He wanted to be early--a whole five hours early.

The man who now called the mansion home was Michael Lawson Sheldon. At thirty-six years old, he was the youngest governor in the history of the state and the first native born Nebraskan to hold that office--his birthplace being Nehawka. He’d earned his stripes as a volunteer captain of the infamous cavalry outfit known as “The Rough Riders” during the Spanish-American War where he got familiar with a 7 mm Mauser rifle during action at the battle of Kettle Hill. He spent most of his official energies hamstringing the railroads with government regulation and pushing for statewide prohibition. Recently, he’d helped massage two laws into existence that displeased Tom. The first restricted brewers from owning saloons and the second ended the railroad companies’ practice of giving out free train passes to influence politicians. Neither of these were the cause of Tom’s visit. He was after something much larger--the senate seat opening up in four months.

Finally he stepped out of the Columbia onto the soggy lawn that was a near quagmire from the fall rains. He instructed Buford and Milton to wait with the car. Lapidus hopped out and followed Tom onto the screened porch as he knocked on the front door. After a minute of waiting he rapped on the door harder, this time with the brass pineapple knocker.

“Perhaps he’s still sleeping,” George said.
“Well, we’ll just keep knocking till he wakes up then,” Tom said and went to rattle the door again just as it opened up a crack.

“Yes?” a voice asked from behind the wood.

“Governor? It’s Tom Dennison come by.”

The door then opened fully and governor Sheldon was behind it, dressed in a blue terry cloth bathrobe over striped silk pajamas, his usually coxcomb hair matted with bed mess. He didn’t say a word as he stood there with the door open and his eyes blinking. He gave Tom a long look, from shoe sole to eyebrows.

Tom leaned against the door frame with his stiff Bowler tipped back past his hairline and forced his hand into the Governor’s. He pumped it with the same long motions of someone filling a tire with air, stepped inside the house without invitation, and said, “Glad to finally know you, Governor.”

Sheldon stepped back and George Lapidus also entered the vestibule. Tom removed his hat and admired the foyer: a grand walnut staircase winding up to the second floor like a corkscrew, a pine table set with vases of goldenrods and lilies beneath a beveled mirror, a grandfather clock with a plate-sized pendulum knocking back and forth inside its glass door, and a housemaid who stood in the back of the hallway with her hands folded across her stomach.

The governor swallowed a globule of spit and said, “Mr. Dennison, it looks as if you’re a tad early for our appointment.”

“And you’re looking a tad peak-ed.” Tom replied. “Have a little too much applejack last night?”

The governor closed the front door and pursed his lips. “I don’t drink, sir. The whole state knows that.”
“What the state knows and what really goes on are two different things, which, truth be told, is why I’ve sprung you so early,” Tom replied.

Sheldon opened his hand towards the library off to the side of the hall. “I was just about to have breakfast. Perhaps Matilda could prepare you something?”

“No for me. I never have a stomach at this hour,” Tom said. “You, George?”

“A spot of coffee would be much appreciated,” George said.

“Yes, two coffees. With goat’s milk if you can spare it,” Tom said as the governor showed them into the library. The room was cluttered with ornamentation: thick spines of leather-bound books on shelves scrolled with hand-crafted vines, moss-green carpet, a rolltop desk with stationary in the slots, pastel pink wing chairs, a silvered wood chandelier, and a fireplace with a brickwork chimney breast and eucalyptus logs roasted down to white ashes from a previous night’s burning.

Tom and George both took a seat on a deep-buttoned sofa and Sheldon plopped down in a rosewood chair, a knee-high tea table separating them. After an awkward few moments of silence, the housemaid brought in a serving tray and set it on the table. A single hard-boiled egg sat in a stemmed holder, a stick of butter rested next to a toasted slice of rye bread, and three upside down coffee cups with gold-edged brims were stacked on a folded cloth napkin next to a spouted kettle. Tom reached forward first, helped himself to a pour of coffee and stirred in milk from a painted carafe.

Sheldon managed a smile beneath his voluminous walrus mustache that didn’t match his thin face and said, “This is quite uncommon, showing up unannounced at someone’s home at such an hour.”
“You mean it’s rude,” Tom said. “My, you certainly have the lingo of a governor down pat, saying what you really mean but doctoring it up with flowery language.”

Sheldon stood from his chair, knotted his robe shut with the fabric belt, and went to the window. He peeked out from behind the velvet curtain and looked on Tom’s monstrous touring car parked in his drive—Milton asleep on the back bench, Harry Buford standing against the driver’s side door in full police uniform, a cigarette with an inch of ash dangling from his lips.

“Expecting someone?” Tom asked.

“I wasn’t. But you showed up anyway,” Sheldon said and returned to his chair. He crossed his legs at the ankle and picked up the egg from its holder. “I see you have the Omaha police working for you.”

Tom rested his coffee mug on his knee. “I don’t believe it’s against the law for a man to have more than one job, cop or not.”

“But one still dressed in his blues?”

“He’s not on-duty if that’s what you’re asking. He works the third shift and didn’t have time to change out his city duds is all.”

The governor paused for a moment and began to peel the shell off his egg in delicate fashion, removing the tiny cracked pieces like flecks of lint. “Well, seeing as how you were in a hurry to scramble down here and get something off your chest that couldn’t wait till lunchtime, why not have at it?”

“I don’t believe you have met Mr. Lapidus. George, this here is Governor Sheldon, the shining light of Nebraska. Governor, Mr. George Lapidus from up Bellevue,” Tom said as the two men shook hands over the breakfast tray. “George has aspirations to be our state’s next senator.”
Sheldon shrugged his shoulders. “So do twenty other blokes. What do you want me to do about it?”

“Don’t be coy with me. You know damn good and well that you are the hire for that position with the legislature being out of session until after the holidays. Now, I know that a whole host of fellas in their boiled shirts with their families’ cotton money come at you every week looking to tout themselves into the chair, but I also know that a man like you isn’t interested in that sort of thing.”

“A man like me?” Sheldon asked. “What do you know about what kind of man I am or what kind of man I’m not?”

“Well, I ain’t spying on you through your bedroom curtains, but I can assume that someone as spry as you living in a house like this and all the power that comes along with it would certainly like to retain it.”

“That sounds threatening, or are my ears full of wax?” Sheldon said as he set his peeled egg back in the cup of its stemmed holder. “But seeing as how you think you know something about me, let me say this about you. I’m aware you’re not gung-ho about my push for counties deciding their own stances on prohibition. You want to stall unionization, I want it on the fast tracks. You got also got some of the same railroad boys in your pocket that I’m trying to hang up on a clothesline. I like to think people can be influenced by words and you, well, your only real rhetoric is the business end of a pistola. So let me save you the trouble and say I’m not influenced by your demagogy and I’m certainly not shaky-at-the-knees because you own a few guns.”
Tom smiled and drained the last of his coffee. “You’re right on all accounts there, save one. I’m not threatening you with anything, Governor. What did you think? That I might come in here before sunup and flash a revolver around the room?”

“I suspect Josiah Willard didn’t think you would, either.”

“I had nothing to do that.”

“I’m sure.”

“The district attorney’s office closed that particular investigation last week or didn’t you hear?”

“Truth is a fleeting thing,” the governor said.

“So is proof,” Tom said firmly.

“Yes.” Sheldon shook his head. “Apparently.”

“Listen, I’m not worried about your policies. A man has every right to push for his own beliefs. I’ll tell you, you don’t have to be my friend. Hell, I got portraits hanging in my office of men who weren’t my friends. But they were men. Give me a man, even if he is an enemy.”

Sheldon popped the whole egg into his mouth. “Are you calling us enemies?”

“Certainly not. But you’re dyed in your own brand of wool, and I’m in mine.”

“Let me give you some advice, Mr. Dennison,” Sheldon said with a mouthful of egg. “Stay in Omaha. You’re a city boy, I’m a state man, and that’s how it’s going to remain.”

“Omaha is precisely the point. More than a third of the whole state lives there and I’d bet my last ten-penny you wouldn’t mind having that kind of number on your half come the next gubernational elections. I can deliver it to you in the bottom of a hat.”

The governor shook his head. “Gee whiz, would you really now?”
“Look, I know you don’t favor the grog, but you need the stewbum vote. Plus, somebody’s got to be senator. Might as well be someone who will do you some good come the primaries next year.”

“And what kind of good would it do putting some rubber stamp in the chamber?” Sheldon said, nodding at George.

“Quite a sum for you, I imagine.”

Sheldon’s face reddened and he sat up in his chair. “You damn snollygoster, this ain’t some county beauty pageant, this is the senate you’re asking for. And you,” he said to Lapidus, “sitting there without a word to say. You want to be a congressman and you aim for it by letting this hooligan spill it at me? You’d had better luck writing me a letter with a five-dollar bill bobby-pinned to the paper as a bribe.”

Tom stood from the sofa and straightened his jacket. “Easy, Governor. You’ll get yourself all riled up before you’re out of your pajamas and that’s no way to start a day. Okay, so you don’t want to run for reelection, that’s all you had to say.”

“Oh, I’ll run. And I’ll win. By a landslide. Just like I did the first time.”

“First times ain’t never the same as second times. Especially not when I get mixed into the batch. Two years ago I couldn’t have given a hoot about state politics, which is how you come by waking up everyday in a house as fine as this. But now I’m telling you I do. And I got one hell of a caucus behind me.”

“Gangsters and cockleburs is what you got,” Sheldon snapped.

“By the thousands,” Tom said, rubbed his hand over the dent in the top of his Bowler and nodded for George to get off the couch. “I thank you for your time, governor. And once again I apologize for the hour. But before I go, let me say this, what are your principles worth to you?
George here would’ve made a fine senator. He’s a blueblood Republican and he doesn’t exercise his tongue when he doesn’t need to, as you’ve seen. Now, whoever you got in mind for the job, just remember he probably doesn’t know that five months ago you purchased a 1700 acre plantation in Greenville, Mississippi. I do. And that fella, whoever he is, also doesn’t know that nobody who works for the government can afford scratch like that unless he’s got family money or married-into-money. And you, well, it’s no secret you’re a bachelor and let’s just say you don’t come from an aristocratic bloodline.”

Governor Sheldon shot up from his chair and stood with his face not more than two inches away from Tom’s. “Many’s the time I’ve had some scalawag in a thirty-dollar suit come groveling at my feet, but never one who done so and then dared to badger me like some schoolyard tough when he didn’t get what he wanted. So you go on and help yourself out of my house and take your threats with you.”

Tom looked away from the governor’s stare and began to walk out of the library. He stopped short of leaving the room and turned back with his hands rattling around change in his pant pockets. “You’ve got the fight in you. I admire that. Perhaps you could do me one service though seeing as how I drove all the way down here so early in the morning?”

“Well at least now you’re asking and not telling.”

“Who is the pick? Obviously you got one in mind.”

“Like fire riding a breeze if I told you. You can find out in January just like everybody else.”

“It ain’t Ed Rosewater, is it? Because that would be upsetting. Giving George here the quick goodbye I can live with. But spelling that bastard Rosewa--”
“No, it’s not Rosewater. That you can rest assured of. If there’s one codger that strikes me more rigid than you, it’s that showboat busker.”

“Well then, Governor, suppose we’ll just be on our way, then,” Tom said and petted the felt crown of his Homburg again as if hoping Sheldon would spontaneously change his mind simply because he was still standing there in his expensive tailored suit and glittering wing, but it was no use. The governor was an oak, even in his striped pajamas. Tom put on his hat, wiped the length of the brim with his index finger and thumb to straighten it and left the mansion with George in tow, the front door closing heavily behind them.

* * *

Buford gunned the Columbia down the pea gravel drive, kicking up a flurry of wet dust in the shaded lane of hickory trees. Not a mile from the mansion, as they skimmed the outside of town on a back road packed with dust, Tom took off his oxfords and massaged the balls of his feet through his socks. Staring out the window as rows of corn stumps flashed by one after the other, he whickered to himself and said, “Can you believe that tadpole governor? Boy, Harry, you should’ve seen how he threw himself a hissy fit in his sleeping gown when I dug in my nails about his plantation.”

Harry responded without taking his eyes off the road. “That don’t surprise me none. You sure do know how to ruffle a man’s feathers when you want to, boss.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re so sunny about it,” George snapped from the backseat. “Maybe you didn’t get the same impression from the governor as I did, but it sure seemed like he told us to march and you up and left at the order without so much as--”
Tom turned around in his seat. “I got done what I was aiming to get done. If that don’t sit right with you, then you go right ahead and give it another whirl. You have my full permission to harass the governor all you please.”

George took out a half-full glass pint of rye from his coat pocket, pulled the cork and slugged it back until there wasn’t but a few whispers left in the bottom. Milton, who’d been drooling on his own shirt collar, opened his eyes at the smell of the liquor and held out his hand. “Give me a lil’ taste of that meat, would you?”

George handed him the bottle and said to Tom, “So you never had any designs of me actually being anything, huh? All you give a good goddamn about is making sure Rosewater ain’t the anointed one.”

Tom smiled. “Now you’re catching on.”

“That’s how you treat me after all this time? Like I’m some backwater nincompoop who likes to get slapped around and--”

“Easy, fella. I done gone and did you a service, you just can’t see it that way yet. What would the senate get you? Less pay for longer hours, more stress on a smaller budget, and less late night opportunities to wet your pecker with whore spittle behind your wife’s back, bless her heart.”

“Always back to that, is it? Always got to be about my weakness for the skirts.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be if you could prove it to me otherwise. Truth is, I can’t trust neither one of you clowns. You or Edward.”

George rubbed his hands on his pants. “Christ, now you’re going to put me in the same stall with Rosewater? I ain’t never done anything to lose your trust.”

“That’s true, but that don’t mean you’re trustworthy.”
“That doesn’t change the fact you set me up for a fall.”

“I did nothing of the sort.” Tom opened a small leather briefcase in his lap, shuffled through a few papers, and uncapped a fountain pen. “But you might have another chance at it, if you really want it. Sheldon is a one-term pony and after he’s on the outs, well, we’ll just see if you still got the hankering for big boy politics.”

George shook his head in disbelief. “What makes you so sure of that?”

“You want me to do a little digging on this fella? See what kind of worms are in his garden?” Milton asked, referring to the governor.

Tom scribbled a quick note on a sheet of paper. “That would be a gigantic waste of time. That do-gooder is going to do himself right into a ditch. Once I get the wet vote in a panic, that’s all it will take. He’ll be out of that mansion quicker than a ray of light.”

“Yeah?” George said. “And what if he don’t? What if he gets his county prohibition options pushed through? Then it’s you who’s on the way down.”

“Listen here, George. There’s something you need to get educated about if you’re ever going to be a state man.”

“I’m all ears.”

Tom turned around in his seat again, his eyelids closed to near slits as light bounced around inside the car. “Some people are good and some bad. Law can’t change them. Not if there was only one of them left in the whole constitution. Saints will always follow it and bad’ns, they’ll always break it. Besides, laws that people don’t believe in can’t be enforced if whole armies tried it. Look around at this state. Men got worries heavy enough to bring a pack mule to its knees and once you tell them they can’t take a load off in front of a bottle or behind a deck of cards and this whole country will be singing fellas like me into the white house just to get things
back to the way they were. So I don’t care what the governor thinks he can do. Plus, any more
these days there are so many laws that people are either lawbreakers or hypocrites,” Tom said,
relaxed back into his seat, and stared at George through the rearview mirror. “And for my part, I
hate a damn hypocrite.”

*   *   *

Less than a year later, Governor Sheldon ran for reelection and lost by more than fifty-
thousand votes. He lost his office on two major accounts: his overzealous backing of the option
for individual counties to prohibit liquor and a state law guaranteeing bank deposits that help
spread the financial panic of 1907. On his last day in the mansion--January 7, 1910--as he was
packing the trunk of his Buick under the snow-covered branches of the hickories, a mail carrier
delivered him a handwritten letter in an envelope without a return address, which read:

Dearest George,

    Many condolences for your recent loss of office. I was hoping for at least
one more happy return. Turns out, having friends isn’t as helpful as having allies. I trust
you will enjoy a happy life of retirement down in Greenville, Mississippi. Enclosed is a
little something to put in your purse.

    All my best,

    T.D.
Attached by a bobby-pin to the corner of the letter was a five-dollar bill. The governor crumpled up both the letter and the money and tossed them into the snow. The man who took his place in the mansion was Ashton Shallenberger--no more a friend of Dennison than anyone else, but a man who was wise enough to push for prohibition when speaking to a dry crowd and changed gears when campaigning in front of the lush workers.

That was all further down the line. Before that, Sheldon did have his pick for the senate seat with the legislature in recess. That man was Elmer Hitchcock--a native-born Nebraskan like himself and a chum from his college days at the University of Michigan who was in his Zeta Psi pledge class. Despite events not wholly working out in his favor, Tom still procured his ultimate desire: a resounding loss for Edward Rosewater.

After his visit at the governor’s mansion that October morning, Tom rang up Rosewater and told him the senate seat was in the bag. For a whole four months following that piece of false news, Edward gleamed around the Bee Building with his thumbs dug behind his lapels, telling his employees in the hallways that he would not forget them when he was in the capital.

On the night before the next senator of Nebraska was announced in the newspapers, Rosewater received the surprise news in a phone call from Governor Sheldon. Sheldon so informed Edward of the content of the conversation he had with Dennison at his mansion earlier that September, the gist of it being that Tom wasn’t polling for Rosewater at all, but for George Lapidus. The heaviness of the deceit struck Edward like a blow to the back of the head. He didn’t even have the energy to put the telephone earpiece back on its cradle. In the morning it was found dangling from its cord off the side of his desk. The exact time and cause of his death were never discovered. The last two people to see him alive were a fireman and a janitress who passed him on the main floor of his Bee Building late that evening after he came down from his office.
Earlier that day he had been in Waterloo giving an address to old soldiers and returned to Omaha well after the dinner hour. His wife had left a light burning in their window that night, but he never came home. The following morning, as the printing press was running fresh ink for the headline declaring “Hitchcock Wins Senate Seat,” newly elected police magistrate Charles Foster--nephew of George Lapidus--arrived through the rear door of the building. On the way to his third-floor chambers, he discovered Edward slumped over on a bench in the hallway next to a hissing radiator, his panama hat in his lap, his head resting on his arm. In the days to come, rumors circulated a variety of speculations--that his heart gave out, that the strain of awaiting the senator’s seat proved too stressful, that his tuberculosis resurfaced, that he committed suicide by swallowing rat poison--but whatever the actual cause of his death, there was only one real fact: Tom Dennison had delivered the final blow.

* * *

Edward Rosewater’s funeral was held at his family synagogue and attended by over a thousand people, the largest final send-off Omaha had ever given to any of its citizens. Tom stood by his son, Victor, and his wife for the ceremony. Edward was buried next to a blue spruce in a simple pine coffin draped with a shawl bearing the Star of David. The casket was lined with ice that melted into drip pans to keep his body fresh. As per Jewish custom, the attendants wore a black ribbon over their hearts and a ripped piece of clothing to symbolize their mourning.

It was an uncannily warm January day. Black snow collected in piles like trash along street curbs. On the long pea gravel cemetery lane, under a promenade of bare crab apple trees, oil slicks were left behind from the procession of funeral cars. At the gravesite, the women wore
black taffeta dresses and Zouave jackets, the men dark suits with white shirts. Numerous floral
arrangements filled the vinyl lawn tent. A silvery winter rain drizzled over black umbrellas.

After the Kaddish prayer was recited and the casket had been lowered, Victor pulled Tom
aside before getting back into the hearse. Tom was standing at the end of the Shura--a double
line of folks facing each other that formed a pathway through which the mourners passed after
tossing a shovel of dirt on the coffin--when Victor came up behind him, touched him on the arm,
and said, “I wanted you to know, I’ve decided not to change the name of the paper.”

“That’s a smart lad,” Tom replied. “Your father loved that name, silly as it is.”

“He loved you, too. Though it didn’t always come shining through.”

Tom paused at the thought of it, and then said, “He was a man. And that’s not something
I come by easy to say of most. I’m hoping you might fill his shoes for the long haul. New York
will always be there, but this paper, this city, could sure benefit from you sticking around rather
than bolting.”

“I might head it out for another year or two, but this town is a rogue’s spit. I’ve got offers
to sell. Big offers.”

“Listen now, I know this place ain’t got all that cosmopolitan swag you developed a favor
for at Columbia--”

“It don’t at that, for a fact,” Victor interrupted.

“Sure, sure. But you stick around for a year and see if something bigger doesn’t just
happen to reveal itself. Give me a full calendar turn and if you still want to sell, I’ll put in a good
dollar more than your top bid and you can be free of it.”

“You got something happening I don’t know about?”
“No, not me. I ain’t the city, no matter how much some folks want to paint it that way. But, I’ll tell you, the pot is boiling and the water’s ‘bout to go over the side and, when it does, I’m going to need you with me.”

Victor considered the option for a moment and said, “Still thinking you got knowledge about something I don’t. If that’s the case—”

“I wouldn’t call it knowledge.”

“What then?”

“A feeling. If there was one thing your pops did better than any man I ever knew, it was writing a catchy headline. Man could make a spring thunderstorm sound like the apocalypse on the horizon. You might have the same skill in you yet, but we’ll find that out in due time,” Tom said and patted Victor on the shoulder as they headed back towards the idling procession of funeral cars.

*   *   *

The last time Tom and Edward ever saw each other, the last conversation between the two names of the Dennison-Rosewater Machine that for twelve years ran the city, was six months earlier in Tom’s office on the evening after their meeting with Louie Black to try and persuade him to call off his recall election of Mayor Dahlman.

After leaving the Fontenelle Club in Bellevue in an abrupt heat, Tom had returned to his Dodge Hotel for his nightly pipe and glass of Vichy water before heading home. Harry Buford was seated on the couch at back of the room, cleaning his police revolver by pushing a slender bristle brush through the barrel in the opposite direction of a traveling bullet. Tom was sitting at
his desk in his socks, listening to a scratchy piece of sunshine on his wind-up Victrola when Edward had entered his office in a flourish without knocking.

“You stupid hothead,” Edward’s voice boomed through the room as he pushed open the office door. “I told you multiple times that little temper of yours is nothing but a bit of chinked armor to protect your ego. You think mounting up with a bunch of ragtags is going to even the score, but you’re wrong. You forget whose word trumps whose in this city. Mine. Mine over all else.”

“Well hell’s bells, Ed. Ain’t it past your bedtime?” Tom said.

Edward stood dripping on the carpet, his suit soaked from a sudden cloudburst that had opened up on his drive back into the city. “You’ve played right into Louie’s hands. You and your goddamned ego,” he said, shaking water off his hat.

Tom stood up from his chair only to sit back down on his desk and pull his silver wool socks up to the middle of his calf. “This has nothing to do with ego. You think I’m all scrunched up about a little tongue spit from some Catholic dago who ain’t got more brains than a field nigger?” Tom asked and turned to his driver. “And I don’t mean that as a slight to you, Harry.”

“Didn’t even consider it as such,” Harry replied absently as he spun the cylinder of his revolver after cleaning each chamber and snapped it into place, unloaded. With a white rag soaked in gun oil, he began to wipe down the metal.

“You see that, Edward? There’s a man just like me. He’s a nigra who takes communion every Sunday and he couldn’t care less what I call his skin or his creed. Words mean nothing to him. Nor to me. It’s action that matters. You’ve said so yourself. Or you used to say, anyhow. And for a man whose every sunup and sundown rests on the long ballot, you sure are short-sighted when it comes to what really gets you your votes in this town.”
“All of a sudden you’re the electoral expert?”

“I have the mayor.”

“For another week, at least.”

“And I have your senate seat if you still want it.”

“You’d like to think so.”

“And who do you think your old pals down at the Fontenelle are going to back for the gig? Whosever running against you, that’s who.”

“After the way you acted today, that’s one thing we can agree on.”

Tom spread his arms in the air. “You have your press gang and your ink. I have my street gang and my gunpowder. So why don’t you run yours and I’ll see to mine.”

“You answer to me. Not to yourself.”

“And just what exactly did you hire me for out here all those years ago?”

Edward didn’t respond.

“To put a chokehold on the masses to get your chums into office, that’s what. And every nitwit from here to the Pacific knows you can’t do that without wringing a few necks. You want to wash your hands of it? Go on back to your mattress and do just that. You know nothing about it far as I’m concerned. Then come next week when the news breaks, you can give me a public spanking on my fanny with your wife’s hairbrush or whatever pleases your fancy and look all the better for it.” Tom paused, drawing muffled laughter from Harry whose attention was still focused on the upkeep of his gleaming revolver. “In the meantime, let me do what you pay me to do because you don’t have the gumption to do it yourself.”

After he finished, Tom returned to the chair behind his desk.
“That’s fine, Tom. Go on and beard me. But you will take your own lumps on this one. God help you, because I sure won’t be able to after this.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Tom said. “You hurry on back to your sink and soap dish, now. You got some scrubbing to do.”

“If you keep this charade up, we’ll have more enemies than friends in this town. Then where will be?”

Tom replied without looking up from his ledger, scribbling frantically on the page with a short pencil. “Exactly where we want to be.”

“Oh? And where is that?”

Tom lifted himself from his chair, pencil still in hand, and walked over to a large grading map of Omaha pinned to his wall. He removed his spectacles, folded them into his shirt pocket and bit down on the end of his soapstone pipe. He circled the entire map in broad, overlapping strokes with his pencil until the graphite tip snapped and turned to Edward with a narrow smile. “Everywhere, my friend. That is where we will be. Everywhere.”
From the start Dennison built up a political machine that extended over the entire city. His genius along these lines created a system that was the wonder of friends and enemies alike, one which political leaders in other cities came to see and study.

*Omaha World Herald*
February 15, 1934
On two separate occasions in his life, Thomas Dennison took the witness stand to give testimony in his own trial. The first occurred on May 18, 1915, for electoral fraud: a gossamer-thin piece of litigation that lasted all of two weeks and the charges of which Tom beat with a laughable ease. However, the second time he placed his left hand on the King James bible and entered the witness box was a much more publicized and detrimental affair: 168 counts of conspiracy to violate the National Prohibition Act.

At ten in the morning on November 15, 1932, in the south courtroom of the downtown federal building, Tom rose from his chair with considerable effort and shuffled past Judge Woodrough’s bench as if he were carding his feet over ice. Gone was the imposing figure of the man who for thirty years ruled Omaha’s underworld and in its place was a palsied grandfather whose left hand trembled following a stroke that past Christmas. On the advice of his attorney, Benjamin Baker, Tom did not mask his physical ailment but instead drew attention to it by letting his hand quiver in full view of the jury as he took his oath. At the beginning of the trial, Baker filed for an extension due to Tom’s health concerns of hypertension and high blood pressure, a request which was denied by the judge due to the fact he had been seen operating his businesses by federal agents outside of his hotels and offices.

Fifty other members of the Dennison liquor syndicate were also in the courtroom being tried as one umbrella conspiracy, the most prominent names of which were William Nesselhous, Milton Hoffmann, Morris Milder and former police officers Walter Psznawoski and Joe Potach. There were so many lawyers and defendants present that a number of them were not afforded the
luxury of chairs and were forced to stand in the back of the room. For the entire duration of the
two-month trial, only twice did the daily proceedings not make front page headlines in the city
newspapers: November Eighth when Franklin Roosevelt defeated Herbert Hoover for the
presidency and November Twenty-Fourth when the first FBI crime lab officially opened in
Washington D.C.

Just that past year, other such political kingmakers, notorious bootleggers and celebrity
gangsters had meet similar ends--not at the hands of rival outfits or enemy bullets--but by the
slowly cranking gears of the legal system. Al Capone was serving the beginning of an eleven-
year sentence in the Atlanta Penitentiary before being transferred to Alcatraz where he would
gradually lose his mind to an untreated syphilis infection and be stabbed with a pair of
haircutting shears in the prison basement. Harvey “Dean of American Bank Robbers” Bailey and
George “Machine Gun Kelly” Barnes were found guilty of kidnapping oil tycoon Charles
Urschel and were sent to Cincinnati before, like Capone, being transferred to Alcatraz. The
DeAutremont Brothers both pled guilty to their roles in the Siskiyou Massacre, were convicted
of first-degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment in Salem, Oregon.

In the years following Tom’s demise, one of his closest out-of-town associates, Tom
Pendergast of Kansas City, was arraigned for income tax evasion in 1939 and spent fifteen
months at Leavenworth maximum security federal prison. Vito Genovese, head of the New York
crime family, retreated to his home in Naples in 1937 to avoid a murder indictment. The political
machines and gangster lifestyles so freely part of the American landscape for the past twenty
years were falling apart in rapid succession as the era of prohibition neared its end, and Thomas
Dennison was no exception.
Once seated at the witness stand, he sipped a glass of water and held his head low as the prosecuting attorney, Lawrence Sandall, began his line of questioning. Three weeks earlier, Harry Buford--Tom’s longtime chauffer who became the prosecution’s star witness after undergoing a change of heart--gave sworn testimony about Dennison’s rule in the city: everything from the buying of other officers, the bootlegging and sale of illegal liquor, prostitution, political manipulation and even orders of murder that came directly from Tom’s mouth.

As Sandall paced the front of the courtroom, after a few initial questions, he quickly brought Buford’s testimony into play. “Mr. Dennison, what was the nature of your relationship with Harry Buford?”

“He was my driver for a few years,” Tom replied.

“A few? Would you consider twenty-four years to be a few?”

Tom sat for a moment. Then with a thoughtful smile: “Are you asking for my opinion on what kinds of words we use to describe bunches of numbers?”

“What I am asking you is if it is true that from the years 1907 to 1931 Harry Buford was your daily driver who received payments from you in exchange for orders to be carried out on your command while he was on duty as an Omaha city police officer?”

“No,” Tom said, his voice powder-soft. “He never drove me while on duty.”

“Yet three weeks ago, Mr. Buford sat where you are sitting now and gave sworn testimony that you, in fact, paid him a monthly income of five hundred dollars for services rendered in addition to offering him an additional one thousand dollars to kill George Lapidus.”

“I heard his testimony and every word of it was false.”
“So you are saying you did not give Mr. Buford orders to murder George Lapidus, make raids on competing speakeasies and to arrest rival solicitors of liquor primarily on the north side of the city?”

“That’s correct. You have to own speakeasies to have competing speakeasies.”

Sandall raised his arms in the air. “Well then, Mr. Dennison, it would appear someone in this courtroom has lied under oath.”

“Yes, indeed. Someone has. But it is not me.”

“So you are testifying that Mr. Buford perjured himself?”

“Objection, your Honor,” Tom’s lawyer--Benjamin Baker--shouted.

“Sustained.”

Sandall then walked back to his table, opened a manila envelop of files and began to riffle through their contents. “Mr. Dennison, you are certainly a well-to-do man. You live at 4012 South Jones Street, is that correct?”

“It is.”

“In a neighborhood often referred to as ‘The Gold Coast’? According to real estate records, the estimated value of that house is 60,000 dollars, more than eight times the national average for even a brand new home. And you possess three fully paid-for automobiles registered in your name,” Sandall read from a typed sheet, “a Rolls Royce Phantom 1, a Packard Fourth Series 426 Roadster and a Chrysler Series 66 Sedan, all of which are considered luxury cars affordable only to a select elite.”

Once again, Tom’s lawyer cried his favorite word, Objection.

“Overruled,” Judge Woodrough said. “However, Mr. Sandall, I do hope this line of questioning has something to do with liquor.”
“Thank you, your Honor. It most certainly does. Tell me, Mr. Dennison, what type of business has allowed you to accumulate such wealth in your career?”

Tom coughed into his cupped hands. “I’ve been blessed enough to make a number of sound investments over the years in the retail and food service industries, all of which are perfectly legal and documented. I own a number of restaurants, hotels, and even a water works company that have yielded me profits over a long life of hard, honest work. I am an entrepreneur. Every dollar I’ve ever earned has been declared and never once have I failed to file my taxes with the--”

“That is all well and good, but isn’t it true you’ve sold liquor at such venues? Isn’t it true that your primary revenue source at those locations was alcohol?”

Tom flashed a narrow smile. “I don’t believe I’ve ever known a man to order a drink at a department store or a water works facility before.”

The courtroom erupted with laughter at his response, but the chuckling was cut short as Sandall continued, “I am glad to see you are still healthy enough to crack jokes at the expense of the court. I mean your hotels and restaurants. Or, should I say your saloons and brothels?”

“You shouldn’t say. Never once have I taken a single penny from a prostitute. I’d go broke and starve before I fattened myself off the degradation of a woman. But I did sell liquor at my restaurants. Before April 1, 1917, that is. Since that day, not a drop.”

“That’s a clever retort.”

“It’s not clever if it’s true.”

“Okay, Mr. Dennison. Let’s talk about your relationship with Al Capone.”

“Who?” Tom joked, again causing an outburst of laughter in the court.
Judge Woodrough, not amused by Tom’s witticisms, sternly reminded him that this was a court of law and to answer the questions with the respect it demanded or he would be held in contempt.

Tom regained his seriousness. “The only information I know about Alphonse Capone is what I’ve read in the papers or watched on a newsreel.”

“So you are saying that you’ve never personally spoken to Mr. Capone or any members of his Chicago syndicate?”

“That is correct.”

“Strange then that Harry Buford outlined in detail to this court your plans to bring the Capone system to Omaha. Also curious are the many occasions he recounted where you took trips to Chicago to visit with Mr. Capone.”

“That’s in line with all his story. He said I went to see Capone in Chicago when he was in prison in Philadelphia.”

“But you did admit to meeting an Al Brown?”

“Yes. Al Brown. Not Al Capone.”

“And what about Tom Pendergast of Kansas City?”

“Mr. Pendergast and I are acquaintances, nothing more. I can’t deny my meeting him on a few occasions. He has family here in Omaha and often frequented my dining clubs when in town. But our relationship has never been one of business beyond his purchase of a steak dinner.”

“Not even to transport what are known as ‘ghost voters’ up and down the Missouri River to aid in your fraudulent election schemes?”

“Objection.”
“Sustained. Mr. Sandall, need I remind you once more of the charges that Mr. Dennison is standing trial for? I am growing tired of your recklessness and lack of focus. If I have to tell you again to keep your questioning to the sale of illegal alcohol and nothing else I will have this jury sent home and declare a mistrial. Is that understood?”

“My apologies to the court,” Sandall said and took a deep breath.

“Actually, your Honor, if I may, I’d like to address the question.”

“To what purpose, Mr. Dennison?” the judge asked.

“We all know why I’m here. Why you’ve put a seventy-four-year-old man through the wringer, and it’s not alcohol. So let’s cut to the heart of the matter. People in this city have it in their minds that I am some kind of dictator who furnishes city hall with whomever I so chose. Mr. Sandall here, along with district attorney Sorensen, his assistant Stalmaster and few others have pushed me onto this stage so they can lampoon me near the end of my life. Some say I am a political boss, whatever that means. My name has been smeared in the press with their words.”

“That is quite enough, Mr. Dennison. Your reputation has no relevance here,” Judge Woodrough said.

“Oh, but it does. I am a defendant in this trial and that’s what I aim to do, defend myself. I have been dubbed a murderer, a pounce, a racketeer and fraud-promoting enemy of the government all because I happen to be an excellent campaign manager. Is it true that I’ve helped Jim Dahlman win the mayor’s office for six terms? Of course I have. Is it true that I’ve assisted and promoted men for other government positions? Absolutely. And why? Because they are men I know, men whom I believe in. Not as mere friends, but for their ability to run this city with good leadership. But never once have I done so by illegal means and certainly not with money that has been procured through bloodshed or kickbacks or ballot stuffing or any other such
nonsense. I sponsor men and aid their cause no differently than any other political activist does with the candidates they support. It is no crime to take an active role in your city’s government. In fact, it is our responsibility as citizens to do just that.”

“Which is why you’re not on trial for your political affiliations,” the judge said. “This is not a newspaper headline. Nor is it a soapbox. It is a court of law. And if it appeases you to waste the court’s time with this grandstanding, perhaps we can move past these proceedings and go straight to sentencing?” After a momentary pause, Judge Woodrough asked attorney Sandall to continue his examination.

“Thank you, your Honor. Moving on now, Mr. Dennison, I understand you do not drink alcohol personally. Is that correct?”

“It is.”

“Then why have you chosen to make liquor the backbone of your operations? Is it not true that since the inception of the Volstead Act your businesses have been subject to multiple raids over that twelve-year period?”

“I don’t recall any such raids on any of my venues.”

“Well, perhaps I can refresh your waning memory of three such violations specifically,” Sandall said and opened a new file from his examination table. “On June 2, 1922, your Cornhusker Cigar Store was found to have been concealing over forty barrels of whiskey and grain alcohol by city police. On September 7, 1924, the Orange Blue Club at 1102 Harney was emptied of over sixty kegs of ale and ninety cases of gin bearing receipt shipping addresses from Chicago. Then again, most recently, on February 12 of this year, a still in Sarpy county known informally as ‘The Farm’ produced an astounding 400 kegs of beer, multiple crates of brandy and cognac and three fully operational stills after federal agents seized that property. So, I’ll ask
the question again. Why has a man who declares a personal abstinence from the drink chosen to sell that very product in alarmingly bulk at multiple locales in direct defiance of federal law?”

“I don’t remember any of those instances you just cited,” Tom said.

“You don’t remember?”

“No. In the past year and a half I’ve suffered two strokes. It is difficult for me to recall specifics from so many years ago.”

“Yes. We’ve heard this sob petition before. But your appeal to have this trial delayed due to your health was turned down based on that fact that under the surveillance of federal agents you were seen operating under your own power in public. So please don’t offend the intelligence and integrity of this court with your denial of illegal activities that we have on record under the ruse that you are ill.”

Tom paused for a long moment and considered his response. “Could you remind me again the names of those locations?”

Sandall referenced his notes. “The Cornhusker Cigar Store, the Orange Blue Club and a Sarpy County property known as ‘The Farm’.”

“Well, for one, I do not own or manage the Cornhusker. I had an office there some years ago, but that was because the rental space was cheap and close to a few of my other properties. I paid the lease owner a monthly rent, but that is all. As far as the Orange Club, I was part owner of that establishment for its early years. We opened that particular club in 1909, I believe, and I sold my shares in 1916, a year before state prohibition went into effect. I have records of that. So whatever has occurred at that address since that date is completely unaffiliated to me. And this farm you referred to I’ve never known. You say that property was mine? Do you have records which show that? If you do, I’d be mighty anxious to see them.”
Sandall smirked. “It seems your memory has some dregs left in it after all.”

“Are you ridiculing me because of my ailments? Do you think I enjoy sitting up here in this state with my body ravaged?” Tom replied firmly, his hand trembling so violently his whole arm shook.

“You’re right, Mr. Dennison. I do apologize. I do not mean to insinuate insult because of your age or your health. But I do expect you to answer my questions honestly and without deflection.”

“Have I not done so? Go on and ask whatever questions you want and I will tell you within my power all that I know.”

“Wonderful. Because I do have a number of them yet. Firstly, let us return again to officer Buford. On his second day of testimony, he recounted one of his meetings with you in the Karbach building in 1921, a known property of yours, where you two discussed an off-the-books cash salary that was to be paid to him in return for the protection of bootleggers under your favor, two men in particular.” Sandall paused and skimmed through his notes. “One Mr. Ronald Livingston, now deceased, who, like George Lapidus, was found murdered not more than a year ago. And a Mr. John McCulloch, also deceased, a former proprietor of the Kentucky Green Whiskey River company who sold that property during the advent of prohibition and took his talents here to Omaha where he began to operate a large still under the façade of the Farrell Syrup Company.”

“I don’t remember any such meeting or the names of those two men who you claimed to be bootleggers.”

Sandall’s face reddened and he threw his hands in the air again. “You don’t remember? How advantageous for you. Now, I’ve been reminded multiple times myself to not bring up any
of your other malicious and equally illegal activities as proponents in this case, but you, sir, need
to be held to the same token. Forgetting something that, as sure as sunup, you remember with
precise clarity is a direct violation of your oath here under God to tell the truth.”

“Counselor!” Judge Woodrough snapped. “If I were you I’d be very careful about stating
the rules of my court not five feet away from my bench.”

“Forgive me for my agitation, your Honor. But the people of this city have a right to
know and not be insulted by this scripted loss of memory. Mr. Dennison, considering the
exuberant amount of your past that has so conveniently slipped your mind, please, do tell us, for
I and this court would very much like to know, what do you remember?”

* * *

Picture Tom seventeen years earlier: dressed in a green-striped seersucker suit with a
white carnation notched on his lapel. Appearing at his front door with a pall of cigarette smoke
around his head, he shook the hand of Harry Buford, who was there to pick him up for his
morning engagements and followed him to the idling Panhard saloon car in his driveway. With a
dry towel hanging out of his back pant pocket, Harry wiped down the brass fittings of the
headlamps and inspected the polish on the brightwork. Once behind the wheel, Buford pulled on
his driving goggles, released the clutch pedal, and drove the boss to his first routine stop of the
day--Hanscom Park on Woolworth Avenue.

The park covered fifty acres of land in one of the richest neighborhoods in the city: two
man-made lakes, multiple flower beds, a large pavilion, and a sheltered picnic area. Upon arrival,
as was his regimen every morning before breakfast, Tom walked down to the small lagoon at the
western edge of the park with a white paper bag of sunflower seeds, sat on a wooden bench, and fed the pigeons. He scattered the seed on the path in front of him and, with the first sound of the kernels hitting the pavement, more than twenty pigeons were at his feet. He clucked his tongue and cooed at the birds as they bobbed their tiny blue heads, nibbling at his offering.

But that day, the first Thursday of August, 1915, a second automobile—a Ford Model C—parked in a gravel lot next to the main pavilion. Inside the cab were two private investigators working for district attorney Christian Sorensen: Roy Towl and Daniel Butler.

Five minutes after Tom took his seat, Roy Towl exited the Ford, walked down the footpath to the lagoon and sat on the opposite end of the bench. Tom had watched him approach. He walked with a long gait and a slump in his shoulders, a day’s worth of stubble on his cheeks, his thick shock of black hair pushed back but not combed, a paisley tie in a loose knot, trousers held up with suspenders, lean waistline, and no jewelry, not even a wedding ring.

As Roy sat down, he hitched up his trousers by jerking them at their pleats and ran a hand through his hair. A long strand of it fell down over his eyes.

Tom tipped back his derby with a flick of his finger, put his arm over the back of the bench and said, “Howdy-do. Fine morning, isn’t it?”

Roy clasped his hands in his lap and stared up at the sky, offering no response.

Tom held out his sack of sunflower seeds. Roy considered the bag, then reached in, scooped out a small handful, and tossed the seeds onto the paved walk.

“How do you like animals?” Tom asked.

Once again, Roy didn’t respond.

“Me, I love animals. Especially pigeons. Most folks don’t, but most folks are ignorant. They think they are vermin. But what most people don’t know is that with pigeons, both parents
raise their young. That’s rare in nature. Not just for animals, but for us, too. Family’s important to them. Family’s the most important thing in life. You have a family?”

“Is that what you want to ask me?”

Tom shook the bag. “What did you want me to ask?”

“I’m sure you’ve got your questions.”

“Actually, I don’t. Not really,” Tom said, rolled down the top of the bag and placed it on the bench between them. “Look now, I don’t know who you are or why you and your pudgy friend have been going ace-deuce at me everywhere or who put you on their payroll to do it. Hell, I don’t even know your first name. You know why I don’t know these things? Because I don’t care to know them. If you had even put the slightest bit of worry into me by now I’d know not only all of those things, but how you take your coffee, your mother’s maiden name, the size of shoe you wear and everything else in between. But you haven’t, so I don’t. I don’t even know why today of all days you finally decided to mosey on over here and plop down next to me, but here you are anyway, sitting with me after all this time and you’re the one asking if I have any questions?”

“You think I’m daft, is that it?”

“Like I said, I don’t assume to know what you are or aren’t. Maybe you are a sap. Maybe you’re a genius.”

“Maybe I’m just patient.”


“Don’t mistake that for cowardice, they’re not the same thing,” Roy said. “A little diligence sheds light on a lot of things that normally might not to a man in a rush. Like you, for
example. You’re a man in a hurry and you got the résumé to show it. Six brothels in a seven-block radius in the sporting district. Thirty gambling halls, maybe more. A handful of hotels. Half of the city police. A three-term mayor you pay out of pocket, who knows how many murders—”

“And a partridge in a pear tree,” Tom interrupted. “But I’d be careful if I were you about assumption. When a man puts that kind of speculation out there and it turns out not to be fact, well, all of a sudden it’s not speculation anymore. It’s slander. And I’ve killed whole heaps of fellas over slander,” Tom said and, with a large smile, popped a cupped handful of sunflower seeds into his mouth.

“I’m sure you have and I aim to find out just exactly how many,” Roy responded without missing a beat. “Sooner or later.”

“Most likely later. More likely than that, never.”

Roy stood from the bench, picked a bit of lint off his coat lapel, and jammed his hands in his pockets. With a shrug of his shoulders, he said, “Well then, aren’t you going to try and bribe me to make sure of it?”

“What makes you think I would ever do something like that?”

“Because I could arrest you right here and now.”

“For what?” Tom chuckled. “Vagrancy?”

“Carrying a concealed firearm.”

“Well, first you got to know for sure that I’m carrying one. And the only way to do that is you got to look to find out,” Tom said, slumped back against the bench and opened his jacket to reveal the handle of a gold-plated Colt pocket hammerless in a holster along his hip. “You want to find out?”
Roy shook his head and laughed. “You know, one day I’m going to make you very uncomfortable.”

“I’m sure you’ll try,” Tom said and pulled a stainless steel tube from the breast pocket of his overcoat. He slid a thick cigar out the casing and held it to his mangled cauliflower ear as if it were a seashell that contained the sound of the ocean. “Speaking of comfort, how’s that Ford for sleeping?”

Roy looked back behind him to the gravel lot where the Model C was parked, the official state vehicle parked on the street in front of Tom’s home nearly every night so far that summer.

“I tell you, as often as you and your fat sweetheart lay out in that hunk, it’s got to be the quill. For me, I got to have the best, too. I’m a light sleeper. Like that fairy tale with the princess with the pea under all those mattresses.”

“Something keeping you up at night?” Towl asked.

“Yeah. Your headlights.”

Roy laughed again. “You might fancy yourself as some kind of merry-andrew, but I know your stamp. You’re pugnacious and mellifluous all at once, which might fool some people, but I’m not one of them.”

“Wow, the way you throw around them two-dollar words, somebody went beyond reading their McGuffey’s in school,” Tom said, stood up from the park bench, and doffed his hat farewell. “Who knows, maybe you’re a genius after all. But we’ll just have to wait and see about that, won’t we?”

* * *

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Of all the things Tom didn’t know about that newest pair of investigators trailing him around that summer, among them were these:

Since their arrival in Omaha at the beginning of May, Roy Towl and Daniel Butler lived in a textile mill boarding house on Harney Street, two blocks away from the Missouri River. Most of the other residents of that fifteen-room, brick-and-quoin building were young immigrants who worked at the nearby quarries and they filled the hallways with the foul stench of the sulfide worn into their coveralls.

The detectives’ room was freshly painted and the silver smell of the new paint was barely thick enough to disguise the odor the quarrymen brought inside on their clothes and skin. The amenities included a rusted sink hung from the wall between their two beds, a pitcher for water as the sink produced none, and weekly laundered sheets. They kept their only window propped open with a wooden stake, their third-story view looking down on a fruit line and the ABC Barbershop which advertised “Wet Shaves” in gold cursive lettering.

The communal latrine they shared with the other third-floor residents held one enamel bathtub so compact a man had to sit in it with his knees up to his belly and a wooden toilet with a ceiling flush cord. Roy dumped ammonia down the tub drain to discourage the silverfish that scuttled out of the copper pipes in flocks before he could stop it up with a rubber plug and have a good soak. Field mice came rushing into the building to seek shelter after the first autumn frost, which Daniel remedied by leaving out dishes of milk spiked with bleach every night only to find a gray carcass or two along the floorboards in the mornings. For the cockroaches that seemed to metastasize right out of the wall plaster and left slimy trails across their pillow casings, Roy scattered glue traps bought in bulk from a corner store druggist.
Every morning a washerwoman brought them a quart of milk delivered by a daily horse-drawn float and a copy of each of Omaha’s three newspapers for an extra charge of seventy cents a week. Along the far wall of the room, Roy had stacked each newspaper by date in three separate piles that were now nearly four feet high. They pressed their suits with a rented electric iron and ate their weekday meals in a shared dining room with the other tenants where fried chicken, butter beans, whipporwhill peas and rice pudding were common staples. Late at night, they worked in the glow of a kerosene lamp and filled their chipped mugs with burnt coffee from a potbelly stove in the parlor lobby. Roy kept a map of Omaha pinned to the wall and often marked it with tracings of known Dennison locales. He studied it frequently, sometimes standing in front of it for more than an hour without moving as if trying to decipher a puzzle.

Originally hired out from the Pinkerton Detective Agency at the beginning of that summer, Roy Towl and Daniel Butler first stepped foot in Omaha off a dining car from Chicago. Roy was all of twenty-seven years old and dashingly handsome with a full head of raven black hair, chiseled jaw line and glittering green eyes cased behind a pair of rimless glasses. Daniel was slightly older--thirty-one--short, heavy, and much less graceful with a block-shaped head, pockmarked skin, and a chronic halitosis so pungent it had already began to rot his teeth.

Both were summoned to the city by district attorney Christian Sorensen--a close family friend of J.J. Donahue, the former police chief whose disappearance on the morning of the special recall election seven years earlier was never solved following an equally botched and purchased murder investigation by the same police who received secondary salaries from Dennison’s office.

On the day they first arrived in the city--May 22, 1915--the young detectives took a yellow trolley car to Sorensen’s office straight from the train station. Dressed in a herringbone
suit with bushy muttonchops and a pince nez clamped to his nose, the district attorney slumped in his Bergere armchair. He drummed his fingers on his belly and studied the pair of Pinkertons for a moment before saying to Daniel, “Do you always go around indoors without removing your skimmer?”

Daniel took off his bowler and sat it on Sorensen’s desk upside down, its interior satin lining stained with old rings of sweat.

“You looking for a ladle of soup now, too?” Sorensen asked.

Roy quickly picked up his partner’s hat and tossed it in his lap.

“I’ve never been a fan of private law enforcement. I don’t know how you boys in Chicago operate, but in Nebraska we pride ourselves on good form.”

“I didn’t know we were here for a cotillion lesson,” Roy said.

Sorensen smiled. “I am of the belief that a state should govern their own laws by their own hand, but it seems more and more that such faith in our city police is one that will not be rewarded. Reason why you’re here. I’m sure you already know the name of this man,” he said and slid a grainy photograph of Tom Dennison across his desk.

“Yes sir. We’ve gone over the packet you sent to the agency.”

“Splendid,” Sorensen replied, stood and stared out his window. “So you are aware that Mr. Dennison has at least twenty of the city’s detectives accepting daily boodles and perhaps three times that number of regular officers. How else could a man so viciously execute a newspaper reporter, police chief, and a city attorney without facing any consequence?”

“The story went national. I remember reading about the murder in the papers when it happened,” Roy said.
“Donahue was a dear friend of mine, but personal revenge is not why I’ve hired you both out here on my own dime. I can’t trust a single badge in this city and I’d have better luck playing a piano concerto wearing a pair of boxing gloves than I ever would of seeing Dennison brought to justice by a member of our police. It’s a foul racket when a man can operate with impunity bought and paid for with the same blood money he earns by wiping out his competition. He’s as brutal as an Indian and as wealthy as a Carnegie.”

“We could just make short work of it and kill the man if he’s a troublesome as you say he is,” Daniel said. “No one would think twice about it.”

“That’s exactly what I’m hoping to avoid. Murder is already a weekly occurrence in this city.”

“Yet arrests for such murders are rare,” Daniel said.

“Are you a detective or a mercenary, Mr. Butler? If I wanted Dennison’s blood, I’d have it with my morning coffee. What I’m looking for is justice. I want to throw a lamp on all his shady dealings, not another body in the morgue.” Sorensen paused and drew his curtains, dimming the room. He then sat back down and lifted a bell-shaped cloche from a tray of cheeses and fruits. He offered the detectives a snack. Roy declined for both of them with a shake of his hand.

“I love a good slice of Muenster and grapefruit in the afternoon,” Sorensen said. He sliced off a section of orange rind from the block of Muenster and slid it into his mouth. Still chewing, he sprinkled a halved grapefruit with sugar until it was covered in a tiny white hill and spread it evenly with the back of his spoon. Then he picked the grapefruit up with his bare hands, masticating its pulp like he was eating out of a bowl.
“And you were worried about me taking off my dicer indoors?” Daniel said as he watched the attorney slurp and gnaw on the fruit.

Sorensen ignored his comment and, with his mouth still full, said, “I do hope you have the nerves for this undertaking, because there is not a day on the calendar when your fortitude will not be tested. Mr. Dennison is an enemy of the highest rank to this city. Worse yet, the people adore him. But most of them don’t know the truth. He continually suborns the justice system with the power of his almighty dollar, the source of his funds being ill-gotten gambling dens and a prostitution ring whose numbers are stupefying, to say the least. He pollutes our politics with a spoils system that continually maces city workers for campaign contributions and voting patronage in exchange for meager employment.”

“So which is it that you are hoping we can pin on the man? Murder, extortion, racketeering, electoral fraud, gambling?” Roy asked.

“I don’t care if you catch him spitting on the sidewalk so long as it finds him in a courtroom seated at the table across from mine. Now, I am no poof, Mr. Towl, but you are a corking good looker. And, you, Mr. Butler, have the face of a glutton. This alarms me. How much will a handsome man with youthful vigor or a man with an affluence for over-consumption like yourselves be able to resist temptation?”

Roy crossed his legs in his chair and Butler’s face reddened.

“I hope you both are as steadfast and resolute as you’ve been advertised to be, because if Dennison ever discovers the purpose of your visit here, he will first attempt to wheedle you with money and women. If that doesn’t work, you will be the next one in the obituaries.”
“Mr. Sorensen, if I may, our whole business relies upon the ability not to tip our mitts to anyone. The fault of your city police is that they wear a uniform. The strength of fly cops like ourselves is that we don’t,” Towl said.

“I pray that you’re right, because if it does happen that your identity ever becomes known, you’ll either be face down in a ditch or on a Pullman car back to Chicago, whichever comes first.”

Roy stood from his chair, replaced his hat on his head and said, “I’m no gilpin, Mr. Sorensen. Your city’s lawmen might have lost their resolve in the cushions of some fainting couch because they can’t resist the cooing of a five-dollar whore they don’t have to pay for, but when I’m hired to perform a duty, I see it through. Rest assured, we will bring Dennison to heel.”

So it was throughout the whole blanch-hot summer of 1915, the detectives trailed Tom with the dogged thoroughness of an amateur prizefighter shadowboxing a world champion and their efforts left them no less physically drained than an effete athlete. In the ragged heat of those three sweltering months, the leaves of ash and maple trees flashed in the sun like tin, houseflies plumped to the size of June Bugs, mud baked into cracks, cart boys poured buckets of water over their draft horses to cool their hides only to watch it sizzle off like spit on a flatiron. Daniel ruined more good shirts than he cared to count with his eggy sweat. Roy prayed for cloud cover but knew the chances for a reprieve from the heat were about as likely as reeling in a fishing line from a rain puddle to find a million bucks neatly speared and dry on the hook.

August started out as a particularly cruel month. Between breakfast and bed down, pedestrian traffic in the usually bustling third ward was slower than blackstrap molasses. Towards sunrise the temperature was nearly eighty degrees. Despite the searing heat, Roy and Daniel maintained their vigilance of Dennison from the oven-like cabin of their black Ford. They
ghosted him as he cruised the streets in his cushy saloon car that hummed over the dusty roads with the sluggish, confident pace of a canal barge--Harry Buford at the wheel, the soft tonneau top scrolled down, Tom’s hair slicked with enough tonic that not even the breeze passing through the roofless Panhard stirred a single strand out of place.

At each of his daily stops--from the packing houses as far south as L Street to the Florence Water Works on Pershing drive to the north--he moved with a calm sureness, his eyelids blinking as slowly as an owl’s, his hair the color of spidersilk in the sunlight. He held a snap-brim hat at his side but never put it on his head. Like a man on a campaign tour, he pumped hearty handshakes with shopkeepers, spent whole afternoons lounging in split-bottom chairs as he chewed the fat with labor union representatives, and sipped birch syrup sodas with bar owners in their taverns. No matter where he was, he never seemed in a hurry to be anywhere else.

On the night before Roy finally confronted Dennison in the park, he and Daniel pulled up to the curb in front of Tom’s Gold Coast home, cut the headlamps and sat listening to the engine tick itself cool. Roy removed his hat and stared through a stand of baby poplars along the edge of the property. Not more than a minute after they arrived, Tom came out onto his porch stoop still dressed in his gray three-piece he’d been wearing all day and waved to the detectives.

“What’s next?” Daniel asked. “An invitation to supper?”

Roy scratched his head and loosened his tie. “A whole summer gone to rot. Three months of sitting in this damn car for fifteen hours a day and it’s all for naught.”

“What else could’ve been done?”

Roy cleared his throat. “Something’s not right. This whole job was a lead balloon from the get-go. I’m telling you, all that D.A. is doing is covering his tracks with our footprints. For all we know he’s in cahoots with the bastard.”
Daniel reached into his jacket pocket, retrieved a mail pouch of spitting tobacco and pinched a hunk of the leaves into his lip. “You really think Sorensen and Dennison are in league together?”

“No, I don’t. But maybe I do. I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“What do you want to do?”

“What we’re getting paid for. We’re going to sit here. I’m through pulling my hair out at the roots over this. We’re going to sit in this car and collect our paychecks until they stopped getting signed.”

And sit there they did for the entire night. Twice an hour Tom appeared outside his front door and ignited a two-bit cigar in the blued light of his porch lamp, his steel-rim spectacles and diamond stickpin winking back bits of light on his dark silhouette. Other times they saw him through the bay window of his parlor room, sitting on a piano stool. His daughter was in his lap on the first two occasions, his hands guiding her fingers over the keys of his Steinway, teaching her how to play. After his daughter and wife were in bed, Tom opened the velvet curtains of his office window, wound the crank of his Victorla and sat with his feet up on his desk, listening to a record spin under the steel needle. He took his terriers outside at regular intervals to let them tussle about before calling them back inside and finally retiring to bed.

At seven sharp the next morning, Daniel woke in the driver’s seat of the parked Ford. He elbowed Roy in the ribs. They’d slept off the whole night at the edge of Tom’s house in turns, each taking a two-hour watch shift. Roy rubbed his eyes and sat up in his seat as Harry Buford backed Tom’s Panhard down the driveway.

“Should we follow them?” Daniel asked.
“What else?” Roy said evenly as blew his nose into his handkerchief and watched Tom’s
Panhard roar past. “I want to have a little chat with our boy today.”

“You really think that’s a good idea?”

“You got a better notion? The man knows who we are.”

“We can’t say that for sure.”

“My patience is yarning out,” Roy said. “I don’t have the stamina to stay on the job much
longer without making headway.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“There’s nothing to like about any of this,” Roy said and slumped back down in his seat.

“So drive.”

Daniel shrugged and started the ignition. Another day of trailing the Emperor of
America’s Middle City, another day of watching him get in and out of cars, change his clothes,
eat his meals, shake hands and feed pigeons, had begun.

It was a peculiar thing that had taken the detectives the entirety of that washed-out
summer to fully understand and even more time to admit to one another. Never once did they
witness Tom enter one of his brothels or gaming dens. Every night he returned home to sleep in
his own bed and every morning he began the day by heading down to the lagoon at Hanscom
Park to feed the pigeons. Often times he rode with his daughter to school and, no matter the
content of his business for the day, he paused to eat a family dinner and played with his dogs in
the evenings before heading out again at night to hobnob with the tambourine and fiddle crowds.
The man who district attorney Sorensen described to the detectives on their first day in town and
the man who they’d been surveilling for the entire summer were two different people. The very
notion of it kept Roy up nights. He could have worried himself over it until his hair grew an inch a day and his fingernails blushed, but the chase was a bootless one.

He and Daniel had gone through all the newspapers piled up along the wall of their boarding room, searching the pages for old reported murders. From editions that dated back to November of the year before, they tallied forty-one non-medical deaths that had occurred in the city. They noted each fatality’s date, description, and place--marking each on their wall map with a blue dot.

When Roy stepped back to assess a bird-eye’s view of where the bodies had been found, he saw a pattern he had long suspected but hoped was only imagination: nearly every single death had taken place outside of Tom’s wards. In fact, only five of those forty-one documented dead were found in Dennison territory. If there was any truth to attorney Sorensen’s claims about Tom’s malfeasance, it was this: he had been so good a criminal that, by almost every provable maxim, he no longer was one.

* * *

Later that same August day, Tom, Billy Nesselhous, and George Lapidus sat in a clubhouse box that overlooked the soft loess track of The Horsemann’s Jockey Club. The soil was the color of powdered mustard and left a fine dust hanging in the air, but ran slow and prevented injuries to the horses. A crowd of nearly eight thousand folks had filled the grandstand to watch the thoroughbreds that afternoon. With a light perspiration on his brown, Tom peeled an orange with his thumbnail and half-heartedly listened to Nesselhous, who was saying: “It ain’t any skin off my nose, but people are sick of crime. And here you are worried about money.”
Tom threw a scrap of orange peel onto the table, his attention focused on the fruit as acutely as a woman crocheting a sweater and, with a scoffing chuckle, absently replied, “Why is it that every narrow-minded bluenose from Red Oak to the river thinks I job all the petty scuffles and gunfights that break out in this damn town?”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Nesselhous said. “It only matters that it’s just the way it is and it frightens decent people. And scared people remember being scared when they put pencil to—”

“I’ll tell you why,” Tom interrupted without looking up as he continued to undress his orange. “When folks can’t understand something, they got to have someone to blame. Same way people blame God every time a tornado rips the roof off their barn or a flood takes their house floating down the street.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Change is in the air and the wind isn’t at our backs anymore,” Nesselhous replied.

“Which is why you ought to give the commission form another look-see,” Lapidus added as he ran his fingers over the top of the felt hat in his lap. The form he was referring to was the city commission form of municipal government that would elect the legislative body on a plurality-at-large basis in place of the current individual councilmen. In the commission form, every voter would select seven candidates from a pool of fourteen with the top seven vote-getters earning positions to city government. The new wave of government had already taken hold in cities like Des Moines, Portland, and most of Texas. What separated the commission form from the current council-management system more than anything else was that the mayor would not be directly elected by voters. Instead, one of the seven commissioners would be appointed to the position, in effect disarming the mayor of all his executive power and making the post nothing more than a ceremonial title.
Tom popped a slice of orange in his mouth. “Boy howdy, George. You’ve been pressing for that since last June and my answer is still No. It will always be No. So give it a rest, would you?”

“Where’s your conservative spirit?” Lapidus asked.

“Back in the bicycle days where it belongs,” Tom said as another string of quarter horses-palominos, bays, chestnuts–were being led into the paddocks down below for the one o’ clock handicap by jockeys in silken pants and knee-high riding boots. At the sound of the announcer calling off the roster, Tom rose from his seat, went to the open window, and spied the ponies through a set of binoculars dangling from his neck on a leather band. After a long moment, with his back to Billy and George, he finally said, “Jim won’t like it.”


“I do,” Tom snapped and returned to his chair. “Man’s been as loyal of a friend as I’ve ever had and I’m not about to strip him down to his under-roos just so you and your pals at the Commercial Club can sneak a couple of your rabbis into office. If you really want a favor, you should just ask.”

Lapidus crossed his arms and rocked back in his chair. “And what if he doesn’t win at all? Smith’s making a hard push in the polls and–”

“Come off it. He’s a GOP stooge the same as all the rest who come before him. And they always make a push this time of year,” Tom said and pushed his plate to the center of the table.

“And it’s those same group of reformers who take their worship on Sundays that are back in my clubs messing with whores and drinking on Mondays. So don’t give me that ‘push in the polls’ nonsense. When it comes right down to it, those rock-ribbed conservatives and sniveling church boys all want what I give ‘em.”
“Is that your only concern?” Nesselhous asked. “Mayoral power?”

“Course it ain’t. I got all kinds-a-concerns. What about provisions for recall or referendum?”

“Those can be added to the legislative bill.”

“Added? Yeah, added. Like rat poison to cake batter,” Tom said as he sparked a cigarette, dipped a corner of his napkin into his glass of alkaline water and rubbed out a spot on his shirtfront.

“This is something you need to consider,” Nesselhous said and gestured out to the track. “Think of it like a horse race. You can bet it all on one stud and hope it lands for a big payday or you can spread it out over the field to ensure your chances.”

“Well,” Tom said, still dabbing at his shirt stain. “That’s a fine metaphor, Billy. But you’re my financial advisor, not my civic consultant. So why don’t you leave the politics to me?”

“Just because we’re businessmen we don’t get a say in politics?” Lapidus said.

“It’s not personal. I don’t ask my doctor to tailor my suits, either.”

Nesselhous leaned forward in his chair. “But that’s exactly why I’m telling you to do this. You want to remain this city’s broker? You want to keep your whorehouse doors open? Then you need to back the initiative for the commission form next month. As your financial advisor, I’m advising you to get Rosewater to circulate it.”

“It won’t take much to convince him,” Lapidus added.

Tom chuckled. “It certainly wouldn’t at that. Selling it to Victor would be a cinch. Man’s a fool for a trend.”

“Get The Bee behind this and the other dailies will follow suit,” Nesselhous said.

“We can call them the ‘Square Seven’,” Lapidus added.
“Call who the ‘Square Seven’?” Tom asked.

“Your party’s ticket for the commission.”

Tom shook his head. “You boys are a hard sell on this and anytime a man’s got a hard
sell he’s also got an agenda.”

“This is modernization, Tom. It’s also about how to ensure votes. What’s the difference if
they’re commissioners or councilmen? They’re still accountable to you.”

“I’ve never lost a race in my life. Why change?”

“Never?” Nesselhous said. “What about the senate?”

“I’ve never lost a city race and the day I do, why, I’ll be gone for good. If this city really
wants me out, it can put me out fair and square.”

“That’s the rub, though,” Lapidus said, stood in hurried flush, and pushed in his chair
hard against the table. “Nothing’s fair and square with you. Everything’s tailor-fit and people are
catching on. You want to see if this city really wants a man like you around? Well, why don’t
you give it an honest-go for once?”

Then, clapping Nesselhous on the shoulder, thanking Tom for lunch and saying he had
another appointment across town, George Lapidus exited the box.

Tom watched him leave, his tiny legs carrying his hefty upper half with their bow-legged
walk. Tom stared at his back until he was gone, then continued to stare at the door as if expecting
him to return. “What’s got him in a twist?”

“Oh,” Nesselhous said. “You know George. He’s always been a little quirky.”

“If by quirky you mean ungrateful, then sure, he’s quirky alright. Man sells light fixtures
and sits on the board of the Commercial Club and somehow he thinks that gives him the right to
put his hat in the ring when it comes to how this city is run.”
“He fancies himself a civic reformer. He can’t help it, but he is trying to help you. We both are.”

“Sure. Help. Alright then, I’ll run it by Victor and get that petition you’re asking for rolling. If it takes then we’ll let it ride, see if you two brains are right or wrong,” Tom said and sighed. “I still don’t know how I’ll break it to Jim.”

“So you’re saying you’ll back the commission vote?”

“Ain’t you heard what I just said? I’m backing it. But with a change or two. We’re putting Dr. Broomfield on the ticket in place of Doug Mallon.”

Nesselhous inhaled sharply. “A nigger on your ballot?”

“That’s right. You want me to modernize, well, we’re modernizing the whole thing. It’s high time we had some color in the courthouse. Broomfield’s a good man.”

“I’m sure he is. Good for you, anyway.”

“Good for this city.”

“Folks won’t like it.”

“Folks are going to like whatever I tell them to like. You included. And another thing, your pal Milder, the goddamn crooked banker that he is, tells me he won’t give out private business loans anywhere north of Cuming Street. He says investing in nigger town is a waste of time.”

“Because it is,” Nesselhous said.

“You goddammed Jews,” Tom said with a shake of his head. “All of you are so goddamn careful. But I’m telling you, you tell Milder he’s going to invest.”

“Why don’t you tell him? You’re more persuasive.”
“I already talked to him once, the nice way. But he’s like you, big schnoz and no backbone. You talk to him. Give him some of that fancy Jew speak. And if he don’t listen the second time, then he ain’t going to hear it for a third. You tell him that.”

“It’s all about numbers to you, isn’t it?”

Tom squeezed his high-buttoned Bullfrogs back onto his feet as he’d been sitting in his socks for comfort. He then stood and held out his palm. “Numbers is the reason why I hold this city in the hollow of my hand. It’s also the reason you got yourself rich. Broomfield’s got a battleship chin and a voice like a flute and I’m going to need him with me when the liquor committee takes up licensing questions next month.”

“The committee would appeal the new licenses with or without Broomfield and you know it.”

“Maybe so. Maybe not. But the small man in any line of activity sees only what is immediately about him and I’m looking in all directions.”

“Especially so to the North,” Nesselhous said.

“Yes, especially there. But that’s just the beginning. Plus you’re getting what you want, so I’m taking something, too.”

*   *   *

Harry Buford’s new home--located at 1804 N. 30th Street--was the grandest marvel of Period Revival architecture in all of North Omaha. At a cost of five-thousand dollars, the two-story, seven-room house was constructed of cherry-hued brick and featured a sodded yard, furnace heating, a gas range, and wall-to-wall carpeting. The seven-thousand dollars that Tom
paid Harry for one year’s salary more than covered the building costs and every stick of furniture, including a Knabe piano, a china closet stacked with Empire crockery, axminster rugs, and chairs of Nantucket leather.

Twice before, Tom had visited the Buford residence; both times were with Sue and his daughter, Francis, for Sunday evening dinner. The third occasion occurred only in passing: Buford steering Dennison’s newest automobile--an emerald green Panhard saloon car--down his block while Tom fought off a spell of hiccups in the passenger seat suffered from guzzling down a bottle of Sheboygan ginger ale too quickly.

The day was June 6, 1915. They zipped along Pickney Street and past Koutnze Park where the Trans-Mississippi Exposition that had once brought over two million people and four-thousand exhibits to the area nearly twenty years ago was now nothing but a blurb of memory and history--a vanished showcase of promised prosperity that had turned into a neighborhood of dilapidated rowhouses and unpainted shacks, a nearly dry lake, and a rubber factory.

As Buford let up on the clutch pedal, Tom held his breath in attempt to subdue his hiccups and stared out the window. In front of a service station of White Eagle gas pumps, a man with splotched skin sitting on the running board of his Baker Runabout was sopping his forehead with a rag. He looked up at their streaming European job and gave a kind wave. Children in brown denim rompers rolled a pair of hoops down the sidewalk with long sticks. A woman in elevator shoes with a pecan complexion pushed an infant in an Oriole go-basket. An ice wagon parked along the curb in front of a dime-a-dance where two men sat on a stack of empty packing crates--one cranking a hurdy-gurdy, the other blowing a solophone with his nostrils.

It was still early summer, but the mercury had shot up into the mid-nineties. All of Omaha was in a glaze. The humidity possessed a cloth-like thickness. The season of the
bluebottle fly and fruit pies with lattice crusts cooling on peeling kitchen sills. Even the brick of buildings appeared to sweat. Tom tugged on his cotton shirt, sparked a Wings cigarette, and looked over at Harry, who hadn’t said more than two words since picking him up at his house that morning.

“What’s eating you?” Tom asked.

Buford glided his left hand over the top of the steering wheel, taking a smooth turn onto Capitol Avenue. They were headed towards The Midway—a North Omaha billiards hall owned by Dr. Jack Broomfield, one of Harry’s neighbors who lived two houses down from his own. It was through Harry that the meeting between Tom and the doctor had been established. “Ain’t nothing in particular, boss. Just passing through this part of town always puts me in a somber one.”

Tom blew a funnel of blue smoke out of his nose and picked a loose piece of tobacco off his tongue. “It’s got a lot of character, though. A lot of potential. Reason why we’re making this errand, ain’t we?”

“Yessir, but this Broomfield, he’s a real tough nut. He gives little and asks for a lot in return.”

“Well, it just so happens that I’m in a giving mood this afternoon. And any man who’s got a lot to want is just the kind of man I need to get what I’m hoping for,” Tom said as they came upon the Midway and parked in the asphalt lot so rippled by heat it appeared rubberized.

The Midway was unpretentious in every sense: a one-story, white wood affair with a flat zinc roof and a tangle of telephone wires snaking out to their connecting street poles. For all its aesthetic modesty, the spot was nationally known as one of the most raucous gambling halls in the country with the majority of its patrons being black. Besides billiards, it proffered roulette,
poker, faro, dice, and a lottery wheel. The sign above the front entrance--in sharp lime lettering--declared: “If you have a family that needs your money, don’t gamble here.”

As Tom and Harry approached the door, a husky black police officer sweating on the sidewalk in full dress uniform stepped forward with his hands up and said, “Got to search you boys first before you can go in.”

Buford gave Roscoe a slanted look. “Ahh, come off it, Ross. We here to see the doctor. He’s expecting us.”

“You know this fella?” Tom asked.

“Course I do,” Harry said, who wasn’t in police uniform but a three-piece, jockey red velour suit. “We work the same beat on different shifts.”

“So you know good and well I can’t let nobody in if they’re packing,” Crawford said and went to frisk Tom, patting him down around his torso.

“Here, I’ll make it easy for you,” Tom said, reached into his holster, removed his pair of gold-plated Colts and handed them over.

After Harry relinquished his service pistol, Crawford escorted them into the club. They passed the long barroom filled with four billiards tables, a cache of wooden tables, and windows darkened with Brussels curtains. Through a stained door to the side of the bar counter they passed into a narrow concrete hallway lined on both sides with penny slot machines. Not a single lever was going cold--there was a warm body for every stool as colored men sat dumping coins from paper cups into the slots.

“Dr. Broomfield is mighty anxious to meet ya,” Crawford said to Tom with a breathless voice as he led the way down the corridor. “He says if there was one man every man needs to know in this town, it’s you.”
“I’d say he’s got things backwards. It’s the doctor who needs knowing in this town,”
Tom replied as they passed through another doorway deep in the building and entered a
telephone service room. A long bank of desk telephones worked by a trio of men were ringing in
unison. A gold ticker tape machine rolled off long paper strips of stock price information.

Crawford paused before the final door that led to Broomfield’s office. In an exasperated
voice, with one word nearly blending into the other, he said, “He says you can get a man a job
just by waving your hand like a magician. So I guess what I’m asking is maybe you might be in
need of another body. I’m asking if maybe you could use a second hand kinda like what you got
going with Harry here. Maybe not a driver, but really anything. I’m a good worker and could
sure do just about any task--”

Tom patted him on the shoulder. “Sure. Alright. I’m always looking. Talk to me again
after I have a word with the Doc and we’ll see what’s what.”

“Thanks, Mr. Dennison. Thanks so much. I really appreciate it.” Crawford nodded
meagerly and just before he opened the door, said, “But just so you know, ol’ Broom, he’s got a
whatchamacallit, a fake leg. Gives him a hitch some in his walk. And he gets a tad prickly if
somebody mentions it.”

“Don’t you worry. I won’t bring it up,” Tom said and stepped inside the office—a
sparsely decorated, high-ceilinged room with mahogany paneled walls, a rolltop desk, an
automatic Davenport bed, large photographs of prominent North Omaha locales hung in metal
frames: The Omaha Monitor newspaper building, Fort Omaha, the intersection of 24th and Lake,
the Holy Family church.

Seated at long library table in an upholstered Turkish rocker was Dr. Jack Broomfield--
the unofficial political leader of North Omaha’s negro community--dressed to the nines in a club
stripe suit with a lavender bow tie and gunmetal lace shoes. He was reading the morning’s edition of the *Omaha World Herald*, a pair of gold-framed spectacles pinching his nose. On the table in front of him was an untouched breakfast plate: potatoes cooked in milk, marbled rye toast smeared in lemon jelly, two runny eggs gone cold, and a crock of coffee.

Broomfield was sixty-one years old but looked to be in his mid-forties; he kept the silver out of his hair with walnut juice stain. Also on the table was a metronome clicking off its increments and a jeweled snuffbox. Born in Savannah, Missouri, he worked as a Pullman porter during his youth but gave it up after he lost his right leg when the train he was working on--an oil-fueled, Baldwin locomotive--went off the tracks and scattered every single one of its passenger cars into the Scottsbluff Ravine. His prosthesis was the best in current medicine--a wooden selpho leg with a steel knee that controlled the movements of the plaster foot with catgut wire. While a physician by title, the doctor hadn’t seen an patient in more than five years as his primary job was not at all dissimilar to Tom’s: a proprietor of booze and gambling who used his wealth for community sway. Among his other ventures, he was a local charter secretary of the recently founded NAACP, a partner of Mildred Jackson for the *Omaha Monitor*--the city’s only black newspaper, and a father of six.

As Tom and Harry approached the desk, Broomfield continued to stare at the open pages of his newspaper. He looked up momentarily but did not acknowledge their presence and returned his attention to the same article he’d been brooding over for more than an hour.

Fanning himself with his beige panama, Tom said, “Afternoon, Dr. Broomfield. Is this a bad time?”

Broomfield folded the newspaper, flung it on his desk, motioned for them to have seat, and stared blankly out his window.
Tom clucked his tongue as he worked over a wad of pepsin gum in his mouth, the pits of his shirt soaked through, and sat down. Buford followed suit and took up the second chair at the head of the desk.

“Something got you in a sour spot, Doc?” Tom asked.

“It’s this heat putting everybody in a nag,” Buford said.

“No, Officer Buford, it’s not the heat,” Broomfield said at last, his voice wispy and delicate; a voice that did not at all match his powerful frame and cursory tone. “But I am in a nag, as you say.”

“You haven’t touched your breakfast,” Tom added and pointed at the plate.

Broomfield removed his eyeglasses, clipped them shut, and tapped his folded newspaper. “Have you seen today’s Herald?”

“Can’t say I have. I’m a Bee man, as you probably know.”

“What’s wrong with this city?” Broomfield said as if Tom hadn’t replied at all and continued staring out the window. “If you had read this morning’s Herald you probably still wouldn’t have seen what’s upsetting me because it’s so damn small.”

“Beg pardon?”

Broomfield picked up the paper again, shuffled through to page six and quoted from an article. “‘Three Negroes are Lynched for Killing Deputy Sherriff’, that’s the headline. This report from Texas. And I quote, ‘A mob lynched three negroes earlier today at Marshall, Texas. The negroes had killed a deputy sheriff’. That’s it. That’s the whole story. Two sentences and a fingernail of print. Meanwhile, on the same page,” he said and handed Tom the paper, “they got adversements for Royal baking powder and nickel silver watches at Brodkeys that might as well be a mile wide and just as tall.”
Tom glanced at the paper and handed it to Buford as if it were a scrap of butcher wrapping that needed to be tossed out with the day’s garbage. “I don’t think you realize how a newspaper works, doctor. Advertisers pay for their square inches. Those boys who got lynched didn’t.”

“Those ‘boys’ didn’t get something else, either. A trial. Two days ago they were accused of murder and this morning they were hanging from a peach tree with their necks snapped. But that little detail wasn’t important enough to print. Oh no. We got to make sure that folks know sugar corn’s on sale for four cents a can down at the Chester Pantry and Martinez cigars are the best smoke in town because that’s what’s important.” Broomfield stood, hitched up his suspenders back over shoulders, and began to pace behind his desk. “What is wrong with this city? If this kind of--”

“Doc,” Tom interrupted as politely as he could, holding his palm up in the air. “I think maybe you’re looking at this from the wrong side of things. What if the opposite would’ve happened? What if that story was front page Sunday with a big photo of those boys dangling from that tree? It’s ugly news to be sure and you got to be prudent with that kind of thing.”

“So it’s best just to ignore it?”

“It’s best to make sure it doesn’t start catching,” Tom said.

Broomfield cringed at the thought, shook his head, and took his straw hat off his coat rack as he stepped towards his office door. “Walk with me, Tom.”

Tom stood and began to follow Broomfield.

“Boss?” Harry said.

“Why don’t you go wait out by the car?” Tom handed him a bill from his money clip. “Or go find yourself some refrigeration across the street. But not in here.”
As all three men left the office, Harry headed over the Comique Nickel Theatre that advertised a showing of two films—*The Eternal City* and *A Fool There Was*—while Broomfield escorted Tom down 12th Street where the sidewalk was hot enough to melt rubber soles down to a paste. Tom fitted on a pair of green-tinted sun lenses, tilted his panama to a severe slant on his head to block out the sun, and unfastened the top two buttons of his shirt. Broomfield touched him lightly on the shoulder and said, “How often do you come this far north, Mr. Dennison?”

“You mean the seven blocks this far north?”

“Yes. Precisely. How often? Two, three times a year?”

“Oh, a sight more than that, I’d say.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do. You come out here riding around in your big fancy car sitting on upholstery eleven inches deep with your one blackie friend driving you around like a guided tour—”

“What are you trying to say? I got no time for chin music. Or insults.”

“Look it now, I know what you want. You want the black vote and that’s going to be an expensive get for you.”

“You’re misjudging me. North Omaha is still Omaha and there’s two things I’m concerned about in my life. This city and my family.”

Broomfield paused in mid-step and ran his thumbs on the inside of his pantline, adjusting the fit of his trousers. “Yeah, I bet. I bet you’re as sweet as dandelion wine and as catching as flypaper.”

Tom scowled. “I’m not the only one who wants something here. So why don’t you try again, polite this time.”
“Alright. How’s this, two months ago you purchased the Florence water works for one hell of a price tag, half a million. That’s what, three blocks away from here? And you’ve yet to hire so much as one person from this neighborhood for—”

“Whoa, now. Let’s get some facts. I bought the Florence three weeks ago for 366 thousand and I haven’t hired anyone yet. Black or not.”

“Okay, facts it is. There are more than nine thousand colored votes up for grabs from here to Lake Street and all the way down to the river. And every single one of those votes lives below the poverty line and most of them are out of work more than half of every year.”

Tom put in a plug of chewing tobacco and spit a glob onto the street. “I do more for the poor than any other in this whole town, you included.”

“Maybe. But the poor need more than just frozen turkeys on Thanksgiving and toys at Christmas.”

“No arguing with you there,” Tom said and wiped the sweat rolling down his neck and chest with a white handkerchief. “But charity’s one thing and revitalizing a whole community is entirely another. I’m all for equality, but equality’s an ideology and ideology doesn’t win elections. Votes do. So why don’t you get on and tell me exactly what it is you want.”

Broomfield opened his hand to the street--paved in choppy flagstone that was cracked and, in some places, missing entire chunks. “Do you see any roads in your wards that look like this?”

“Well, street maintenance is pricey. And when something is pricey there’s got to be a need to justify the price. You got to have people who can afford to drive a car if somebody’s gonna afford to fix them up so they can drive on it.”
“All that cart before the horse and chicken before the egg nonsense, right? Now, one way or another, something’s got to give first or nothing will ever--”

“Well, to do it right and not just patchwork it up to make it pretty,” Tom interrupted, hoping to move the conversation along, “concrete paving is the only way to go. Eight inches thick ought to do the trick. And quality like that, that’s what, a dollar seventy a square yard? Yeah, I’d say that’s manageable.”

Broomfield smiled for the first time all morning. “Well now, look it who’s an expert on laying slab.”

“I ought to be. It’s my concrete company.”

“There’s something else that’s yours, too. The water works. Now there’s a lot of jobs to be had. Good jobs. Management jobs. Jobs folks around here could use and deserve because--”

“You got a percentage in mind?”

“Indeed I do.” The doctor paused and waved a foldable hand fan to cool his face.

“Seventy-five.”

Tom whistled in amazement.

“Anything less and it would look like colored folk were voting for the same straight ticket that gave away jobs in their own neighborhood.”

“Alright now, Doc. Just keep your shirt on. Seventy-five it is,” Tom said as they came around to the intersection of 14th and Amos and caught sight of Albert’s Candies and Soda Fountain Shop. “But what say you to getting out of this heat and wetting our whistles?”

Broomfield nodded. Both men took off their hats as they stepped inside and sat on a pair of cracked vinyl stools along the counter. Wooden ceiling fans wobbled on their axes so unevenly they appeared one bolt turn away from crashing down entirely. A large, light-skinned
soda jerk with moon white palms, a clean apron and white paper cap so small on his giant head it appeared comical sauntered up to the counter and asked them their pleasure. Broomfield ordered a lime seltzer with a scoop of peach ice cream and Tom said, “Suppose I’ll have a sody-pop. Black cherry if you got it.”

“Sorry, sir. Ain’t got that.”

Tom scanned the row of flavoring bottles lined up against the spotted mirror next to the seltzer spritzer. “Hey, watermelon. Yeah. That sounds fine. One watermelon sody-pop.”

The barista poured out his drink in one long sizzle and dashed in the syrup. Tom took half of it down in one monstrous swig after tossing out the straw, balled up his handkerchief in his hand, and dabbed at the wet spots on his cheeks. “Ahhh, that’s the ticket. We’re getting along famously now, Doc.”

“So long as I get it in writing.”

Tom took another long gulp of his soda. “That’s just not the way I conduct business. And I don’t make promises often, but when I do they’re just as good as any written contract. Hell, they’re better. Now, time wise, we can get cracking on the roads right away. If there’s one thing this blazing heat is good for, its laying a smooth stretch of concrete. The jobs, too. Lickety-split. You want three-fourths? That’s 340 brand new shining jobs. But you’ll want more than that I’m sure. Which is alright, because there’s more where that comes from.”

Broomfield stabbed at his drink with his straw. “Good man.”

“Something else on your mind?”

“As a matter of fact, something you said back in my office. How did you put it? With those boys down in Texas? That kind of thing being contagious?”
“Catching is what I said.” Tom leaned over close to the doctor, close enough to whisper.

“Which is why you’re going need more than just a few new roads and a handful of jobs. Hell, I could give a job to every colored man in this city and pump city monies and even my own monies into little projects like new streets and cleaner water and better pay for police and the whole caboodle, but that’d be voodoo medicine like a mother’s kiss on a scraped knee. So let me say something. Something you might not like much. You can’t wring violence out of a man. Violence is a part of our God-given nature, same as love and compassion and jealousy and all the other. All we can do is put a lid on it. Reason why you don’t see any hooliganism going down in any my wards unless I give the say-so. Some say that makes me a crook. But what I really am is an administrator. That’s what I’m hoping you can make your fellow negroes understand. All it takes is one floater off his leash to stir up some nonsense. Be it a lynching or twenty buildings burnt to the ground, it all comes from the same place. Which is where you come in.”

Broomfield shook his head. “You and I are talking about separate notions. I want to improve people’s lives. All you want is to throw a few dollars and factory jobs at me so that once you get your precious colored vote it remains your vote.”

“No, we are talking about the same thing. The very same thing. Sure I want the colored vote. But I also want the Jewish vote and the Italian vote and even the prairie dog vote if they were allowed in a booth. I want the Greek vote, too. But, guess what? I’ll never get it because there ain’t any Greeks left. Which gets us on to what you want. What you really want. You don’t want to better people’s lives. You want to better your own. And the only way for a gambling-shack negro to better his life is to better everyone else’s first.”

“Are you trying to say something or just hurt my feelings?”
Tom stood up from his stool. “Let me illuminate it for you.” He called out to the counter worker, “What’s your name, friend?”

“John, sir. John Weathers,” the worker replied, stepping forward.

“That’s a fine name. My brothers’ name is John. So tell me, John, your sign out front says you sell the best candies in all of Omaha. Now, is that true or is it just a bunch of horse swallow?”

“Yes sir. Best I’ve ever tasted.”

“Well, if you say it’s so it’s got to be,” Tom replied and went over to the opposite wall where slanted shelves held a wide assortment of sweets in open boxes. He unfolded a waxy bag and began to select a few items with a tiny scoop: silver dew drops, Jordon almonds, bonbons, papershell pecans, banana taffy, and caramels. Broomfield watched him curiously as he filled the bag and returned to the counter. One by one, Tom picked up a new candy and popped it in his mouth until he’d tried them all. Sucking on the last piece, he said, “Yes sir. I’d say it’s true. This candy kicks the pip out of just about any other I’ve ever had. And that watermelon sody, that was the perfect remedy for a parched throat on a hot summer day. In fact, I’ll have another pour if you got one to spare, thank you kindly.”

John nodded and hissed out another draft into Tom’s glass.

“And what does candy and soda have to do with anything?” Broomfield asked.

“Take a look around this store.”

Broomfield glanced around the empty shop.

“Ain’t a soul in here. A day as hot as this and sody as tasty as the one I got in my glass here, why, this whole counter should be filled to the brim. There ought to be a line of folks going out the damn door waiting in the heat just to get a pour.”
Broomfield began to catch on to what Tom was saying. “Not everyone is well-off like you and me, though. Very few can afford extra frills like soda and candy and--”

“Right. But when I came into your place not an hour ago, the whole damn hallway was just littered with boys pumping pennies into your slots. And what men pay to sit at them stools is a whole heap more than they’d pay to sit at one of these,” Tom said and pointed at the empty row along the counter. “You say folks don’t got any dough, but there they are in your den spending it just the same. Oh, there’s money here alright. But most of it’s in the wrong pockets.”

“Tom--”

Tom stood to leave before Broomfield could get another word in edgewise, teased out his shirt front to separate it from his wet skin, and replaced his panama on his head. From his pant pocket, he slid a slip of printed paper across the counter top with his index finger. On it was a list of the names for his straight ticket for the coming year’s city election--everyone from Mayor Dahlman on down to his ward councilmen to the city engineer and the building inspector.

Broomfield held his cold glass to his temple as looked over the handbill. He was practically sweating the walnut juice stain out of his hair. “God sakes, every single one of these ironed shirts is a Democrat. North Omaha has always voted Republican and--”

“It’s hasn’t always, no. And if you start in on all that party politic hoopla, I ain’t going to help you at all. There a lot easier ways to get a few thousand votes. Cheaper too. But I ain’t interested in cheap or easy and your folk ain’t voting Republican or Democrat. They’re voting Dennison. And I’ll give a job to every man you send my way who’s fit for it. And tomorrow morning when you wake up and look out your window, there’ll be a fleet of Allied Concrete trucks fixing up your streets. So if you want to get those things and get along with me, this is how it’s going to go. If not, just let me pay for my candy and sody-pop and I’ll get back in my
big fancy car with my one black friend and be long gone back over where folks drive around on roads as smooth as a shaved cheek on their way to their work.”

Broomfield sprung up from his stool like a man late to the podium and pumped Tom’s hand more than he did shake it. “You can count on me.”

Tom grinned and wiped the sweat off his palm on his trouser leg. “That’s a smart play. Now you’re making good sense. Yes sir. I’ll be your friend for a long time to come so long as you’re mine. That’s all it takes and we’ll get along just dandy.”
Chapter Seven: Fur Coats, Basements, and Ballot Boxes

Seven gray shadows on a black ridge: shapes of men--all shoulders and coat flaps and hat brims--backlit by a pair of car headlamps. Then, the chiaroscuro flash of shadow and light developed: the figures were seven men standing on the crest of a cliff overlooking a shivering strip of the Missouri River. A gibbous moon had risen, blue as concrete. The first snowfall of the year came with nightfall: silver, fuzzy, diagonal. Slender trees materialized in the background like aluminum stripes. Shredded snow clouds fleetly eastward, outlined by a lunar embroidery.

Finally, a splash of color to the scene: muted brown derbies and taupe fedoras, then the shadows became faces. Four of the figures--the Hoffmann brothers and two shoulder hitters from Kansas City--leaned on shovels like canes and passed around cork tips between puffs. Chip Hoffmann with a blaze of thinning red hair shaped like a shark fin, Milton in a camelhair coat stained with grease, dirt and spots of paint. A fifth shadow, J.B. Hummel, sucked nosily on a lozenge. The last two men were intercity political bosses of equal standing as well as namesakes: Tom Dennison and his Kansas City counterpart, the elephantine Tom Pendergast.

The cliff on which they stood would, in later years, come to be known as Devil’s Slide thanks to the proficiency in which it afforded many diseased prostitutes, bankrupt business men, and other hopeless quarry bent on suicide a surefire ticket onto the next life. The forest itself--a two-hundred acre growth of riparian marshland--would come to be known as Hummel Park before the end of the decade. After winning his appointment as superintendent of parks and recreation, J.B. Hummel purchased the land with city funds, envisioning a family recreation area with horseshoe pits, riverfront trails and picnic shelters.
Currently, it was nearing midnight. The moon was latticed by silver-blue tree branches. Sideways snow melted upon impact to the still warm ground. All seven men inched closer to the edge of the cliff and considered the sharp, sixty-foot drop-off.

The gas headlamps of the Knox truck illuminated the bowing trees above their heads. A second automobile--a canary yellow Winton Flyer with a canvas roof that Pendergast and his two men had driven up from Kansas City--idled alongside the truck, spouting vapor from its feedwater pump. In the distance, wolves howled. Tom, wearing a rubberized trench coat, brought a fat white cigarette to his lips. Pendergast, wearing a beige fedora and weighing in at a hefty two-hundred and eighty pounds, swallowed a hearty gulp from a hip flask without any apparent movement in his sagging throat. The bodies of three shoeless thieves with old bullet wounds in their heads and torsos were covered by a mason tarp in the back of a Knox stake bed truck.

Tom instructed the Hoffmann brothers to back the flatbed up to the edge of the cliff. Once the truck was at the precipice of the sharp slack, Pendergast’s two men unhooked the bed gate and tied sash weights to the ankles of the three bodies.

“Sure would be just as easy to dump them in the river,” Hummel said to Tom as he leaned over again to look down the cliff side.

“I think we’ve polluted that particular stretch of water more than we ever should have and I don’t want to risk any run-ins with the law, considering this is our guest’s first unofficial trip to our city,” Tom said. “Unofficial being the key word.”

“And I’ll have you know that your thoughtfulness won’t be forgotten,” Pendergast added and took another swig from his pocket bourbon. “I certainly appreciate the favor.”

Tom smiled. “Think nothing of it. Mr. Hummel here is just a bit nervous. It’s his first burial. But leave it to me and I’ll make a cemetery out of this forest yet.”
“You’re daffy,” Pendergast laughed and wiped a bit of spittle from his mouth.

“And I am not one for this sort of thing,” Hummel said. “I mean, all of this over a few stolen coats? It just doesn’t seem measure for measure.”

“Hey, it’s not what you steal, it’s who you steal from,” Pendergast replied.

“I was supposed to help clean your business,” Hummel said to Tom. “We never discussed dirtying mine.”

“Well, as far as dirt goes,” Tom said and handed Hummel a stack of newly minted bills. “I’m supposing you won’t mind this dust.”

Hummel fanned through the greenbacks. “Can’t argue with money.”

“Because it doesn’t talk, right?” Pendergast joked with a wide smile on his beefy face. He gave a signal to his men to toss the three bodies over the cliff.

“About time,” Milton said. “This place gives me the willies. I heard albinos live in the trees.”

“I heard it’s an old Indian burial ground,” Chip added as he helped drag the first body out of the truck bed.

“Hard to believe, isn’t it?” Pendergast shook his head. “Grown men still afraid of ghost stories.”

“Well, sir, you kill as many people as I have, and you got to believe they end up going somewheres,” Milton said and, with assistance from his brother and Pendergast’s two men, propped up each body to a standing position and pushed them over the edge one by one. The cliff was a natural formation of erosion and as steep as a building side with very little shrub growth. At the bottom of the crag was an embankment of muddy marsh and, with the forty-pound sash
weights tied to the dead men’s feet, each body quickly sank below the surface following the six-
story fall.

“And so go three more votes, never to be seen again,” Tom said as he peered over the
cliff. He removed his hat and placed it over his heart.

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll still cast their ballots for the foreseeable future,” Milton said as he
tossed his shovel into the back of the truck.

“I’m sure you’re right,” Tom agreed.

“Speaking of votes,” Prendergast said, “you rely too heavily on the deceased and sooner
or later some bookworm in some government office is going to get curious. And when do-
gooders get curious, they always find somebody else is doing bad.”

Tom had a hunch as to what Pendergast was referring. “Perhaps the old Missouri can be
of some service to us yet besides a convenient grave.”

“Exactly right. Boats ship supplies. And voters, they’re the most valuable supply of all. I
knew from the first you were a kindred spirit. It must be the Irish in us.”

“I’m thinking it’s got more to do with the money in our pockets,” Tom replied. “You
could be an old zip coon for all I care, so long as you’re on the square.”

“You won’t find a fella more foursquare than me.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Tom said. He bid his farewell to his new Kansas City associate
before he climbed into the cab of the Knox truck.

“We’ll be in touch.” Pendergast gently patted Tom on the cheek as he boarded his
Winton Flyer with his men, its fenders sinking low as the axel took on his heft. Both autos
rumbled out of the forest, gas lamps guiding their way through the trees until they reached
Pershing Drive. As they split in separate directions, a third set of headlights—belonging to a Ford Model C—came on in the woods.

* * *

The week before: in the backroom of the Owl Eyes pool hall guarded by a steel-lined door with a pair of gun slots, Tom sat at an oval table in a matching green tie and pocket square, nursing a cup of black coffee while a whole cigarette burned away in the notch of an ashtray. The room was dense with red carpet, cigarette smoke as thick as a London morning fog, wooden walls with nails serving as hat pegs on which hung a row of fedoras.

Amid the intermittent clacking of billiards balls on a nearby snooker table where the Hoffmann brothers were banging around a game of nine-ball, Tom poured a long stream of sugar into his demitasse and packed a fresh cigarette against a matchbox while the previous one continued to spiral smoke. A game of solitaire was dealt out on the table and he flipped over a new card every few seconds from a deck as worn as old bar soap. Finally he stopped doctoring his coffee and fiddling with the cards long enough to listen to a proposition from Julius and Vernon Heller, a pair of transient stick-up men who made their daily bread robbing everything from mail delivery coaches to jewelry stores and graveyards. Seated with them at the table was a third man whose name Tom had forgotten as soon as he shook his hand.

A glut of fried chicken served on wax paper instead of plates and sidles of beer rested in front of the three professional looters whose latest haul and the matter under discussion was this: fifty imitation fur coats they’d carted into the backroom on a pair of wheeled hotel coat racks—
Hudson seal, Baltic leopard, French sable. Tom unknotted his tie and brushed a few rogue ashes from his waistcoat as the oldest of the two Heller brothers, Julius, was saying:

“The beauty of it is, the seal ain’t seal. It’s muskrat. The leopard ain’t leopard, either. It’s dyed rabbit fur.”

“It’s hare hair,” Vernon said with a short smile.

“I ain’t interested in fakeries,” Tom replied, flipping over a seven of spades after licking his thumb, then a three of clubs. No help. “If you want to sell knock-off retail, maybe you ought to get a job behind the Brandeis counter.”

“Sure, the coats are counterfeit, hehe.” Julius let out a throat chuckle. “But like I was saying, that’s the beauty of it. We can sell them to you for eighty a piece, lets call it, and you can turn around and sell them as the genuine article for over double that.”

“Mink is going for two-hundred a pop in the store windows,” the third thief said as he pulled a piece of chicken skin off the bone and dropped it in his mouth.

Tom reared his chair back on its hind legs. “The next time you come in here, do it before you’ve put all the rest of your day’s spare time into your arm.”

Vernon said, “We haven’t powdered up in over a week. We’ve been working.”

“Right. You’ve been sticking up unemployment lines and stealing watermelons out in fucking Gretna,” Tom laughed.

“This ain’t the real thing,” Julius replied. “Which is what I’ve been trying to tell you. It’s better than that. We got marmot dyed to resemble mink and opossum dyed to resembled fox fur, which is how you kneed your dough because the dames, they can’t tell the difference. For every coat you buy you’ll make a hundred dollars profit, maybe a hundred and twenty. Times that by fifty and whaddya got?”
“The change I lost in my couch cushion last week,” Tom said and turned his attention back to his game of solitaire, slapping over cards on the table in front of him.

“If you’re worried about origins, rest your mind,” Vernon said and gestured behind him to the pair of wheeled racks that held the fur coats. “We drove these beauties up from Kansas City ourselves.”

Tom popped his head up. “Kansas City?”

“The West Bottoms,” Julius said. “The score was a cinch.”

“Well, in that case,” Tom said and waved over to Milton who set down his cue stick and went behind the bar into a side room past a bamboo-curtained doorway. “How much did you say you wanted for the whole lot?”

Julius looked briefly at his brother. “Call it an even four grand.”

“Well, we’ll make it four grand then,” Tom said and waited for a moment until Milton returned with a large, string-tied envelope from the room behind the bar. He handed it to Tom and, reaching inside, licking his thumb again as he did when dealing cards, he laid four easy stacks of taped bills on the table.

“You see, I knew you’d think this was a smart buy, Mr. Dennison,” Julius said as he anxiously scooped up the money.

“And you boys will need a spot to lie low for a few days, I’ll bet.” Tom stood and exchanged handshakes with all three men. “I’ll have Milt here set you fellas up in my newest hotel for the week. After that, you’d better blow out on your own.”

“Appreciate your sunshine,” Julius said as he and two associates were led out of the pool hall by Milton, grabbing their hats off the wall.
After the three thieves were gone, leaving the stolen coats behind, Tom touched Chip Hoffmann on the shoulder. “Rack those goddamn balls, straighten your tie, get me a long distance line brought over to my table and go buy brick of hazelnut ice cream from the sweetshop across the street,” he said, rattling off the items like reading from a grocery list.

Chip cinched up his necktie. “We already got some rum raisin in the icebox.”

Tom plopped back down in his chair. “Good enough. But the next time I got business going in here, make sure you and your brother look the part. Knocking around a cue with your shirtsleeves rolled up is unprofessional and I won’t have it.”

Chip nodded in agreement, hustled behind the bar, carried over a candlestick telephone with a long extension wire and set it on the table. Tom put the phone stand in his lap, lifted the earpiece off its cradle, wiped the bell-shaped rim with a napkin, and asked the operator for a long distance connection.

“Central? I need a line through to Kansas City. Yes. The Jackson Democratic Club. Local number Spruce 7132,” he said as Chip brought him three scoops of rum raisin with a clean spoon. It took eight minutes for the intermediary operators to patch in the route of the call and, while Tom waited on the line, he pushed around the ice cream in his bowl, rarely bringing the spoon to his mouth.

Finally the connection was made to Pendergast’s office. Before Tom even heard the voice on the other end of the line say hello and with a mouthful of rum raisin, he blurted: “Tom Dennison from up Omaha calling for Mr. Pendergast.”

“Speaking,” Pendergast said, whose voice sounded like he was gurgling water.

“Well, T.J., you old so-and-so. How’s business? So slow you’re answering your own telephone now?”
“Business is swimming, you sonuvabitch. Actually, I ain’t got much time at all. Just stepping out for a lunch appointment.”

Tom used the end of his necktie like a napkin to wipe ice cream from the corner of his mouth. “You wouldn’t happen to be missing any fur coats, would you?”

“I might be.”

“Well, I just come into possession of fifty such pieces and, if they’re yours, I thought you might like to come claim your property,” Tom said as a heavy cough came through the line. He yanked the receiver away from his ear as if spit could travel two hundred miles through the wire.

“You running a lost and found?” Pendergast asked as he cleared his throat.

“I got more than just stolen coats, friend. Also got three fellas you might have gotten some trouble from in the past. Two by the name of Heller.”

“Sons of bitches.”

After a moment, as if waiting for Pendergast to say more, Tom finally replied, “So, when can I expect you to get on a train?”

“No trains. If it is like you say it is, me and couple boys will drive up.”

“Hey, however you like to travel so long as you ain’t walking.”

“This weekend soon enough?”

“I’ll put out the fancy china,” Tom said.

“Righty-O. You’re a real sport. See you in three days,” Pendergast replied and the connection ended.

* * *
Later that same night, towards three in the morning, the Hoffmann Brothers took a back stairwell up to the fourth floor of the Hotel Boutique. The hallway was dimly lit and longer than a football field, hung with the occasional mirror and framed painting. Their pace was that of a pair of men hoping to pass the time rather than execute a task. They’d taken off their shoes at the top of the stairs and walked in their socks to muffle the sound of their footsteps. Both carried full choke, double-barreled shotguns inside their overcoats, the muzzles visible through the bottoms of their knee-length flaps.

They paused at the last door at the end of the hall where Milton had taken the Heller twins earlier that afternoon. Chip tipped back his velour hat and pressed his ear to the wood. No light or sound was coming from inside the room. Nodding at his brother, both men clicked on their flashlights and readied their shotguns.

With a second set of keys, Milton unlocked the door and pushed it open slowly. It creaked ominously, their figures silhouetted in the doorway by the hall light. They scanned the beams of their flashlights about the room. A pair of single beds situated with their headboards against the wall each bore a slumbering Heller brother. One of them was snoring. Moonlight streamed into the room through a window despite drawn curtains. Chip put the end of his flashlight in his mouth. Milton returned his to his coat pocket after clicking off the bulb.

Then, together, they crept up to the bedsides. Shotguns raised simultaneously, both aimed only inches away from the heads of the Heller twins--it was impossible to tell which was Julius and which was Vernon, as if it mattered--the Hoffmanns each fired a single slug, braining the thieves in their sleep. Pillow feathers exploded in the air. Blood burst against the headboards like paint popped from a balloon. Skulls shattered as easily as carnival glass. The blasts were loud enough to wake half of the hotel.
Seconds later, in the adjoining room, the third thief scrambled out of his own bed after hearing the gunshots and rushed into the hallway wearing nothing but his union suit. Milton was on the move just as quickly. He stepped outside the room after kicking the door open. Bringing the stock of his 12-gauge to his shoulder, he fired his second barrel into the escaping thief’s back before he was twenty yards away. The force and close range of the shot could have stopped a charging lion. The slug thundered through his spine and exited his stomach, the hole so wide you could see clear through it to the other side of the wall. His pancreas was lying by itself on the hallway carpet six feet in front of his fallen body.

Milton dropped his Browning to the floor, hustled over to the corpse, and drug it by both arms back inside the room. In less than five minutes, the brothers had stripped the three bodies completely naked and piled the corpses into the claw-and-ball bathtub in the washroom. There was barely enough space in the tub, arms and legs hanging over the sides. Blood veined down the porcelain. Chip turned on the showerhead and let cold water run over the thieves in order to slow their blood flow and rinse their skin. A whole lot of pink paneled down the drain. The sprayed heads of the Heller twins were missing entire sections of skull and jaw. The exposed parts of their brains were a dullish gray color.

As the shower hissed, both brothers ripped the blankets and sheets off the beds in both rooms and laid them out flat on the floor. They tucked their shotguns into the first spread sheet, put their shoes back on, and took turns washing their faces at the bathroom sink. Ten minutes passed and there was still no noise out in the hall.

Finally, the Hoffmanns lifted the first body out of the tub and rolled it into one of the hotel blankets with their shotguns like a cocoon. Then they did the same thing for the other two corpses and turned off the shower. One by one, they lifted each body and carried it down the
back stairwell as casually as furniture movers hauling a couch. On the bottom floor, the stairway exit led to a narrow alley of delivery docks where their flatbed Knox truck was parked. Once all three bodies were in the truck bed, Milton closed the back gate and covered the haul with a large masonry tarp.

When the police finally arrived on the scene two hours later, they came equipped with mop buckets, ammonia, shampoo, hydrogen peroxide and a gunny sack of large bristle brushes. Newly appointed police chief Walter Psznawoski--a man best known for his snorting laugh and paintbrush mustache usually full of peanut shell crumbs--supervised the cleaning efforts with his arms crossed over his belly. When asked about the possibility of a murder by a small crowd of newspapermen who’d gathered in the hotel lobby, Pszanowski shrugged his shoulders and said: “Aww, ain’t nuthin’ like that. Just some crazy kids pulling a prank. Fired off a couple pop guns and tossed some pig blood all over.”

And so the joke began: if nothing else, the new leadership of Omaha’s police force provided the best maid service in town.

* * *

After the three bodies had been tossed over the edge of Devil’s Slide three days later, a third automobile--a black Ford Model C--that had been waiting a quarter a mile away in the trees pulled up to the cliff side. At the wheel was detective Roy Towl. He cautiously steered the Ford to the precipice the two Toms had departed from five minutes earlier. In the passenger seat, Daniel Butler was scrapping dead cells off his tongue with an ivory brush in the hopes of repairing his chronic bad breath.
“This look like the spot?” Roy said after pulling up alongside the cliff.

Daniel pulled the tongue scraper out of his mouth. “Close enough. What in the hell were they doing out here in the middle of the goddamned night?”

“Taking out the trash,” Roy replied as he yanked the clutch lever, silenced the engine, and exited the Ford—a loan from district attorney Sorensen’s own garage to tail Dennison on all of his errands. Daniel followed his partner’s lead and both men walked over to the edge of the ravine where they began to examine the area with flashlights. The floor of the forest was soggy from the overflow of the many surrounding sloughs. The light snow had stopped and, with just a few steps, both of the detectives’ shoes carried a full inch of mud on their heels. Roy crouched down, pulled up his pant legs past his sock line, and gazed over the edge of the drop-off. The surface of the brackish water was visible in the moonlight. Daniel took a white onion out of his jacket pocket and bit into it like an apple.

“And you wonder why your breath reeks? What good is brushing going to do you when you eat garbage like that?”

“It helps keep me awake.”

“Ever hear of coffee?”

Butler groaned and tossed the onion over the cliff. “Suppose whatever those boys dumped down there wasn’t vegetables.”

“Not whatever. Whomever. There were three bodies that went over the side.”

“How do you figure?”

“Three splashes. They unloaded each one separately. When you can’t use your eyes, you have to use your ears.”

Daniel squatted down next to Roy.
“This Dennison is a smart fellow. Out here nobody sees or hears anything.”

“Except for us,” Daniel said.

“And what did we witness? Did you make any of those other men with him? I counted seven total.”

“Two were his lackeys. Chip and Milton Hoffmann,” Daniel said, as his finest detective skill was an apt ability for memorization. He could scan through a whole folder of mug shots and remember each corresponding name to its face within an hour of studying. “Who was the big fella, though?”

“Not sure. What I am sure of is he’s not from here,” Roy said.

“How’s that?”

“He didn’t have any license plates on his Winton and Nebraska is one of the few states that requires all vehicles to display registration. Even a crook like Dennison has tags on his cars.”

“So he could be from nearly anywhere.”

Roy stood, struck a paper match, and brought its flame to the end of a hand-rolled cigarette. “No. He’s from somewhere close enough that he drove here instead of taking the train. I’m thinking Missouri or Kansas. Iowa, maybe.”

“What does Dennison care about some out of town bloke?”

“That’s the odd thing about it. All summer long trailing this guy and I’m fighting to stay awake from boredom. But now this? Three corpses we never saw killed being dumped over a cliff five miles outside of the city limits with a few out-of-state visitors along for the ride?”

“Maybe’s he looking to expand his brand of murder into a national chain?”

“Truth cloaked by jest,” Roy responded with a sudden realization and walked back to the Ford.
“What does that mean?” Daniel asked after tapping the clotted mud from the bottom of his shoes on the runner board and closing his car door.

“It means you might be more right than you know,” Roy said and turned over the ignition. “That large out-of-towner? He was wearing a yellow fedora and driving a yellow Winton Flyer.”

Daniel thought for a moment. “No? Kansas City? It doesn’t make sense.”

“This Dennison is a lot bigger than we thought.”

“Or a lot smaller.”

Roy shook his head. “Unless there is some other criminal in the tri-state area who weighs nearly three-hundred pounds and is that fond of yellow, then that, my friend, was none other than one Kansas City crime boss, Mr. Tom Pendergast.”

* * *

Three weeks later, on the last Monday in October, Tom sat alone at a back table in the Brandeis Cafeteria dining on a plate of beef tongue with garden spinach and sunshine cake with orange icing. Milton Hoffmann entered the restaurant through the back service door, waddled up to the table lit by a candle in a hurricane vase and said, “Gang’s all there waiting for you, boss.”

Tom nodded and wiped his mouth with a napkin. He left his plate half-finished and a five dollar bill under his water glass. Following Milton outside onto the corner of 22nd and Maple, he propped open an umbrella to shield himself from the freezing rain as they walked across the street to the Piggly Wiggly grocer. It was just past eleven at night. The wet pavement shimmered like a freshly waxed rink in the white glow of globular streetlamps. A steel-tired truck splashed
up water. Wooden signboards above pub entrances flapped in the wind. As Tom came under the grocer’s canvas awning, he collapsed his umbrella, shook off the excess droplets, and entered the Piggly Wiggly two hours past its closing time.

Inside, amongst the pyramids of canned vegetables, boxed baking soda and stacks of oil sardines, he gave a hearty hello and handshake to the proprietor--old man Sal Jenkins who stood behind the register quivering in his full clerk uniform with puffed sleeves and a banker’s visor. After cramming a cigar into the side of his mouth, which made his cheek bulge, Tom continued to follow Milton down a set of wooden stairs to the cellar. The basement floor of the grocery was nothing but dirt and the walls were painted cinder blocks. A single Klieg light on a metal stand illuminated the surroundings as bright as day. As Tom came to the bottom of the stairs in his palm beach suit, wool topcoat, and genuine lizards buffed to a mirror shine with smoke wheeling off his cigar, he took a pair of pigskin dress gloves from his pocket and fit them over his hands.

Four other men also dressed in snappy fabrics--Tom’s brother John, Chip Hoffmann, Harry Buford, Clark McKay--stood in a half-circle around the small cellar whose ceiling was barely tall enough to walk under without stooping. In the center of the room were two men sitting in chairs with their hands bound behind their backs and potato sacks over their heads--police magistrate Charles Foster and his uncle, George Lapidus.

Charles was still dressed in a suit and tie. Lapidus was in his rayon pajamas, having been hustled out of bed. Not his bed at home where his wife was worrying down her fingernails with an emery board, but one of the fifteen brass numbers at The Berryman Club where he’d just finished making it with a whore name Lulu and was sucking down a bottled bock beer and commenting on the calming effect of the Japanese Comet fish in the tiny glass globe on her nightstand when a pair of masked strong-arms with oily revolvers broke into the room, grabbed
him up, threw a potato sack over his head, and tossed him in the back of their tin lizzie for a ride over to the north side grocery where he now sat with a urine stain on his crouch.

For a long moment Tom considered the setup and gnawed on his cigar before he finally drew up a third chair and sat down.

“Take those bags off their heads,” he said to Milton who went over and yanked off the potato sacks.

Lapidus’s eyes blinked wildly as they adjusted to the light and the surroundings of the cellar: his nephew tied up next to him, Tom sitting before him in a split-bottom chair, and the other men holding pistols at their sides. Charles Foster--sloe-eyed, towheaded, and the man who had found Edward Rosewater dead on the hallway bench in the Bee Building--looked up at Tom but said nothing.

“Tom?” Lapidus said. “Thank God. Tom, you know me. Tell your boys that you know me. We’re old pals. If this about the whores, I’ll stop. I swear to God, I’ll stop.”

“I’ll be with you in a minute, George, but first I want to have a word with your nephew here,” Tom said, licked his thumb, and unfolded a sheet of paper from his breast pocket. He held it up in the air for Foster to see. It was a list of ten addresses that Foster authorized to be raided on a court order he signed the previous week. Foster didn’t react at seeing the paper.

“Evening Judge, how’s your week been?”

“You’ve come to kill me,” Foster said calmly.

“Balderdash. Like your uncle said, him and me, we’re old pals. And one day, given enough time, you and me, we’ll be old pals, too. I just wanted to have a little heart-to-heart,” Tom replied and shifted in his chair, scraping its legs against the concrete flooring.

“The murderer’s a comedian,” Foster said.
Tom smiled. “A murderer, you say? And a comedian, too? Hell, the only thing that’s funny is the way you youngfellows repay favors these days. It’s not enough that you’re eating off Syracuse china every night and having your wife walk around town in a chinchilla coat, but you got to have your morals to go along with it and now the name-calling, too?”

“Where did you get that list?” Foster asked, then paused and shook his head, for there was only one person who could have acquired such information--police chief Walter Pszanowski.

Just the night before, the chief had paid a visit to Tom’s hotel office dressed in his long blue uniform tunic and holding a leather valise in the crook of his arm. It was late and Tom was in his smoking jacket with a jimmy pipe hanging out the side of his mouth. A bag of honey nougats was spilled out across his desk as he went through the numbers from the day’s lottery wheel figures.

“We’ve got a touch of trouble,” Pszanowski had said. He sat down on a chaise draped with a bear skin and snapped open the hasps of his valise. He handed Tom a manila folder of papers, thick as a bible. “I did some snooping around, just like you asked, but you’re not going to like the results.”

Tom, distracted by his accounting, emptied his pipe by banging out its contents into a glass ashtray, popped in a mouthful of the nougats, reached across his desk and weighed the tome in his hands like fruit on a grocer’s scale. “What’s this?”

“That there is nearly five months of your life in print. These two persons who’ve been following you--”

“Yeah, the growths on my backside,” Tom interrupted.

“They’re Pinkertons from Chicago working for the district attorney.”
“Sorensen?”

“Man’s got a real zeal for morality.”

Tom’s shoulders slumped at the news. He swiveled around in his Morris chair and gazed at the clock on his wall. “There’s been a lot of that going around lately.”

“Apparently he was a dear friend of my predecessor.”

“Donahue? Jesus Christ. That’s what started this fire?”

“Trust me, being reminded of that man doesn’t do a whole lot to calm my nerves, either. That’s one fate I’d like to avoid.”

“All of a sudden you’re a hothouse flower?”

“Whatever you think I am, you’ve got to cool your heels. These Pinks have been documenting everything,” Pszanowski said and patted the folder in Tom’s hand. “This here is what the one calls ‘The Towl Report’. Roy Towl’s his name, the skinny one. The other is Daniel Butler.”

“Man’s got a lot of spine,” Tom said.

“I’m not kidding about taking it easy, either. At least for a while.”

“I can’t slow the mill. This is an election year.”

“That’s exactly what they’re aiming for. Their days of following you around on the streets are over. They’re going to the books now. So maybe you ought to play this one straight and hope folks follow formula just because they’re used to it.”

Tom shook his head. “I’ve got too much to lose for that kind of wager.”

“Just read the report. It took me a lot of maneuvering to get a copy of it. These detectives, they’ve got a few regular police working on their half.”

“Your own men?” Tom asked angrily.
“Three of them, to my knowledge. Boys I can’t do nothing about, either. Some men can’t be swayed and giving honest police with perfect records their walking papers would only put the heat on me.”

“Lord knows that can’t happen,” Tom said with a sneer.

“You think you’d find another fell a who’d risk the job to get you this kind of information? I ain’t complaining, but I’m not going to be any help to you if you don’t listen up every once in a while, because there’s something else, too. They’ve got plans for a raid day after next.”

“Don’t you ever have any good news for me?”

The police chief sniveled and thumbed his porcine nose. “And not just your gaming halls either, but your cathouses and your counting rooms, too. Which is why I’m doing it tomorrow,” Pszanowski said and handed Tom another folded sheet of paper. “These here are the addresses. So if you got anything in there you’d rather not lose, get it out tonight. Just make sure to leave a little something behind so it looks like I’m still doing my job.”

Tom nodded. “Appreciate you helping me soften the edges.”

The police chief smirked. “Can’t raid a place that’s already been raided.”

“And you get to pacify the drays, your favorite activity.”

“Hey, I run a clean administration.”

“Yeah, the floors and windows maybe,” Tom said, pulled a bottle of stomach bitters from his desk drawer, took a swig to unstring his nerves, and a sudden realization registered on his face. “You say these two fellers, these Pinks, are working with regular police?”

“That’s right.”
“Well how the hell did they come by clearance for a raid? They need court signatures for that kind of thing.”

Psznowoski sighed. “You’re not going to like the answer.”

The answer was Charles Foster--the man who’d been given his job as police magistrate by Tom’s own finagling and was now bound to a wooden chair in the grocer basement.

Currently, Tom leaned back in his split-bottom chair, pulled his left leg up over the right like it was a hefty piece of luggage, handed his still-burning cigar to Milton, folded his hands in his lap and said, “I want you to explain something to me, Charles.”

Foster stared down at his shoe tops. “I’m not saying another word. You already went and made your mind up about things so I won’t give you the satisfaction.”

Lapidus squirmed in his chair, working his shoulders as if trying to free his hands. Chip Hoffmann stepped forward and pistol whipped him across the face with the stock of his .38. Lapidus let out a whimper and a quick line of blood dribbled down his cheek from where he was struck just above his eyebrow. “Sit still, you bastard,” Chip said and spit a long string of tobacco juice on his face.

“Well, that’s quite enough. Man’s not going anywhere. Can’t you see he already pissed himself?” Tom snapped at Chip, stood, untied Lapidus’s hands, and handed him the folded square of a Christmas handkerchief from his pocket.

Lapidus took the kerchief and wiped the blood and spit from his face. “What’s this all about, Tom?”

“I already told you once to hush up, or do you want another smack?” Tom said, sat back down, and nodded to Milton, who shuffled over behind his chair. Redirecting his attention to Charles, Tom continued, “This is the last thing I wanted. But you broke faith with me. We had an
agreement, but what good are agreements if you cast the terms to the four winds and jot your little ordinances behind my back?”

“I never agreed to work for a gangster,” Foster said evenly.

Tom craned his head around the room to look at his men with a smile, amused by the word. “There you go again with the name-calling. Gangster? You mean like a hoodlum?”

“You know exactly what I mean,” Foster said.

“No judge, I beg your pardon, but I surely don’t. A gangster is somebody who brings society down. A gangster is somebody who uses violence because they don’t know no other way.”

“And what would you call this?”

Tom hunched forward in his chair and brought his face closer to Foster’s until the judge lifted his head and looked him in the eye. “A gangster is somebody who goes looking for trouble. That ain’t me. No sir. I’m for peace. A gangster, that’s the last thing he wants. But a man, even the most peaceful man, he knows there can’t be peace so long as he’s getting kicked by his pals. And no man who calls himself a man can expect to stand there and take a kicking and not do anything about it. You, judge, you are more a gangster than anybody in this room. And you surely ain’t no man.”

“Tom, whatever’s been done, we can repair it,” Lapidus said.

Tom snagged his handkerchief out of Lapidus’s hand. “I thought I told you twice now to shut your trap. Boy, I don’t know what kind of blood runs in your family’s stock, but I got one of you who don’t listen and the other who crosses the fella who pulled him out of his no-avenue clerk job and put him all the way up in a district courtroom. Now, what kind of sense does that make?”
Lapidus sat there silently, afraid to speak again.

“You can answer the question,” Tom said. “Either one of yous. It’s an honest question.”

“What in the hell kind of stunt did you pull?” Lapidus asked his nephew.

“I only did what was right,” Foster said after a moment and looked again at Tom. “What was good. You say I’m not a man, but what is a man if he doesn’t stand by his principles?”

Tom bolted out his chair in a fury and slapped it across the room. “Principles, you say? What, you got principles now of all sudden? That’s news to me. I’d say your principles changed mightily once you got what you wanted. And what did you want? You wanted what every man wants, a good job with good pay, a home for his wife and kids, a high place in society. And I gave it to you. Gave it to you better and faster than all your education could give it to you. And you took it. Yes-sirey. You took it and you stood there and shook my hand knowing it was that hand that gave it to you. And now that you’ve gone and got yourself in a spot tied up to a chair and facing what you’ve done, you want to talk principles? Well, let me tell you something, judge. Principles are all well and good if they are unwavering principles. But that ain’t what you got. What you got is an elastic conscience.” Tom paced the cellar, his hands flying about in the air until he calmed himself, took in a deep breath, and crammed his hands back into his pant pockets. With more reserve, he continued, “And you say you are a man. You ain’t no man and there are all kinds of men. A man might be a safe-blower, a former convict or any other breed of filth so long as he’s not a double-crossover. But that’s exactly what you are. And then you have the nerve to sit there and call me a gangster?”

Tom then went to the other side of the cellar, picked up the chair he’d launched across the room, set it back down and was about to take a seat again when he instead drew his Colt pistol from his shoulder holster. He cocked it with a gloved hand and pressed it hard against Foster’s
forehead, who winced and closed his eyes. Milton grabbed Lapidus by the shoulders, held him down in his chair, and tilted his head back as Chip came up and forced the barrel of his own pistol into his neck.

“Tom,” Lapidus begged, “Tom, this ain’t the way. I didn’t have nothing to do with this. Whatever Charles did he did of his own accord.”

“Of his own accord?” Tom repeated the words. “Wasn’t you the one who told me he was loyal? A loyal pup, you said? You recommended him, vouched for him, and now you that you got the steel on your skin, all of this has nothing to do with you?”

“I’m not afraid of death,” Foster said, his eyes still closed.

“I’m sure you ain’t. If you were, you’d be apologizing like Peter after the third cock crowed,” Tom said and momentarily took his gun off Foster’s forehead. “But least you’re finally sticking to something, late though it is. But what about your wife, Emmy? And your son, Jack?”

“I got a wife and kids, too,” Lapidus pleaded.

“Lord have mercy, George. You’d say just about anything to miss the bullet. But you know, with all your yattering I’m more inclined to put you on the slab.”

“God, please. Honest out, I didn’t know what he was doing. If I did, I would’ve acted against it. You know I’m on your half, through and through,” Lapidus cried as a stream of urine ran out of the bottom of his left pajama leg, soaked his sock, and began to puddle on the floor.

“Goddamn, he’s wetting himself again,” Chip said and lifted his Bostonians one at time to examine their soles as if he’d just stepped in a horse apple. “These are Martins scotch grain.”

Tom chuckled. “Quit your asssing around and act like a man who can afford a second pair for chrissakes.”

Chip shook his head and reapplied the end of his pistol to Lapidus’s neck.
“So how about it, judge?” Tom said. “You still ready to find out what’s on the other side of this life or have you changed your mind again?”

Foster opened his eyes slowly. “Alright. Yes. Alright, goddamn it. I can’t renege the court order, but never again. I swear it. From now, I swear it. For my daughter and wife, I swear it.”

Tom tilted his head and cocked back the hammer of his pistol. At the sound of the tiny click, Foster closed his eyes again and braced for the bullet, but none came. Tom lowered his pistol, stuffed it back in his holster and snapped the button shut. In turn, Milton released his grip on Lapidus’s head and Chip followed suit by shoving his .38 into the back of his beltline.

“Well then, it’s settled. That wasn’t so hard was it?” Tom said, stepped back, sniffled twice, and readjusted his felt hat straight on his head. “Everybody deserves a second chance, but nobody deserves a third. You just remember that, judge. You remember that Tom the gangster gave you a second chance and spared your life on this night. And you.” Tom turned to Lapidus. “I got a new job for you. From now on, it’s your sole duty to keep the tabs on your nephew here. Make sure he stays in line, because if he don’t the next time you see the dirt floor of this cellar it’s going to be raining down on your corpse by the shovel full.”

Lapidus panted and heaved but could not raise his head.

“George, tell me you’re hearing me.”

“I’m hearing you, boss. Loud and clear.”

Tom turned to his men. “Alright then. You boys make sure that the judge gets back safe and sound to wherever you found him. But don’t drop George back off at the whorehouse. Take him to his wife as is and let her see her man in his sleeping gown with the urine on the pants and the smell of perfume on the fabric,” he said and made a pantomiming waft at his crotch with the
flick of his hand. He pulled his overcoat back on his shoulders and bounded up the cellar steps two at a time to the main floor of the grocery with Harry Buford following close behind.

Once upstairs, Tom approached the register where the owner Sal Jenkins, eighty-one years old and quivering like an autumn leaf, had been standing during the entire confrontation. Tom smiled at him and looked about the store. “How’s business these days, Sal?”

“Slow,” the old man said softly, then corrected himself. “Slow but steady enough.”

“That’s alright, Sal. You don’t need to be afraid of telling me the truth. Tell you what, I need to pick up some trimmings to take home to the wife,” Tom replied and quickly loaded up a brown paper sack as Buford trailed him around the darkened aisles. Within two minutes he’d collected four tall cans of evaporated milk, Dabo enamel cleaner, two tins of cigarettes, early June peas, sugar-cured bacon, Sunshine brand lemon snaps, and a box of Quaker puffed wheat.

When he returned to the front of the store, Tom set the bag down and laid a crisp fifty-dollar bill on the counter. “That ought to cover these here groceries.”

The old man stared at the banknote. The total sum of the groceries couldn’t have been more than four dollars. “That’s too much, Mr. Dennison.”

“Nonsense. That’s just the right price. But, I tell ya, I’m feeling a little headachy. What you got for that?”

The old man stammered and reached for a bottle behind the register where a sundry of toiletries--Bay Rhum for dandruff, milk of magnesia, bright pink boxes of Euthymol toothpaste and Pears Soap--took up their own separate section. “Syrup of Figs does alright by me whenever I get a spell.”

“Toss it on in, then,” Tom said, peeled off another fifty from his roll and placed it gently on top of the first. “For the family.”
“Mr. Dennison, one’s too much already and I--”

“Quit it now. You earned it, staying here past your operating hours. And no rent this month or the next. So if any of my boys come round by mistake, you tell them I said so. And if you get any argument out of them, you call me.”

Then, just as Sal was stumbling to find the words to express his gratitude, Tom waved him off, told him no thanks was necessary, scooped the bag off the counter, and said to Buford, “Come on then, Harry, let’s hit it. It’s getting on past my bedtime, too.”

* * *

Election Night, 1915, arrived on November Fourth. Shortly past eight o’clock, a pair of paddy wagons pulled into the parking lot of the Riverside Inn—a gambling establishment that appeared more like an abandoned warehouse with its shuttered windows, sagging tar roof and dilapidated brick structure. Sitting three miles outside the Omaha city limits on the west bank of the Missouri River, the Riverside was tucked in between a pickling and smelting factory.

As the police vans came to a halt in the lot, Roy Towl, Daniel Butler, and five freshly recruited Omaha policeman that had not been touched by Dennison’s machine—a brigade Roy dubbed his “Morals Squad”—exited the two vehicles and approached the building armed with snub-nosed pistols and maple-stock rifles, trudging through the ashen snow. At Roy’s signal, they burst through the front doors and moved past the bouncers with force.

“Everybody freeze! United States Office of the Inspector General. This is a raid,” Roy said as he held his newly appointed federal badge in the air and his Morals Squad filed into the room behind him. Everyone in the gambling hall went silent—the din of laughter, shouting, and
pink-shirted croupiers calling out their games hushed in one fluid second, as if turned off by a switch.

“If anyone tries to interfere with this operation, you will not just be arrested, you will be shot. I have a court-ordered warrant for a search and seizure of the facility,” he said to the tuxedoed manager who was standing behind the bar, “and I’m going to need you to show me to your basement.”

“Basement? There’s no basement in here,” the manager said.

Roy stepped up to the bar counter. “If you don’t show me to the basement I will have you arrested on federal charges for obstruction of justice.”

The manager hesitated and swallowed hard. Daniel Butler and the five other officers were fanned out in a circle behind Roy, their rifles held slack but ready to fire.

“You’re making a big mistake,” the manager said and produced a set of keys from his trouser pocket.

“No sir, I’m making an arrest and this entire property is, as of this moment, barred from business and ordered by a signed court document to be closed at once. So if you take any longer in showing me to the basement you will spending the night at county holding,” Roy said.

The manager then quickly took Roy behind the bar, past the beer coolers and back offices. Fumbling with the keys, he unlocked the steel door that led down to the basement. Roy and Daniel marched down the steps with two of the regular police officers while the other three remained on the main floor with the instructions to clear everyone out of the building and to arrest anyone who did not comply.

The basement was largely bare with cement walls and furnished only with a long, double row of counting desks on which rested typewriters and ticker machines. A large chalk slate took
up the entirety of the eastern wall, marked with the results from the day’s horse races that came over the ticker. At the end of the room, at a long oak table, four men were going through the contents of ten ballot boxes. Piles were divided up on the table as they sorted through the votes—one pile for the Dahlman ticket that were to be put back in the boxes, the other pile to be thrown away or burnt. Roy moved to far end of the room--his warrant and federal badge in one hand, his pistol in the other--where Tom Dennison was standing behind the table next to Billy Nesselhous and County Commissioner John Lynch as he oversaw the operation.

Tom, dressed in a royal blue Chester Worsted suit, looked up at Roy as he approached. “You again, huh? What’s it now? You come back to talk some more about pigeons, have you?”

“Mr. Thomas Dennison of 4012 South Jones Street?”

Tom smiled. “You know who I am.”

The men who’d been sorting the ballots stopped their work and stared at the officers who’d just barged into the middle of their count. Tom instructed them to keep going as they had a schedule to keep.

Roy overruled his order. “All of you are to cease what you are doing at once. I want everyone up against the wall with their hands on their heads.”

“On what grounds?” Tom demanded, hands on his hips.

“Mr. Dennison, I have a warrant for your arrest for federal corruption charges of conspiracy to commit electoral fraud,” Roy said, wagging the warrant in the air, and nodded at Daniel to take Tom into custody.

As Daniel stepped forward to arrest him, Tom said, “You have no authority to arrest me or any man in this state. You’re a private investigator.”
“I was a private investigator,” Roy replied. “I’m now a special agent for the United States government, as is my associate, Mr. Butler. And if you refuse to come quietly we will take you by force.”

And it was true.

For the past month, Roy Towl and Daniel Butler had been working in the employ of the federal government--appointments of which they been offered during a meeting at district attorney Sorensen’s office the week after they trailed Tom into the forest where he dumped the bodies of the three coat thieves over the cliff at Devil’s Slide.

In addition to Towl, Butler and Christian Sorensen, two other men--U.S. attorneys Otis Clancy and Champ Coughlin who’d just arrived in town all the way from Washington D.C. after a two-day trip in a sleeping car--sat on a trio of beige couches arranged in a circle.

The two U.S. attorneys had been sitting side by side on the couch next to a telephone stand and a potted silk banana palm tree. Both held tea cups in their laps and were discussing the purpose of their visit to Omaha to the detectives. The first attorney, Otis Clancy, with his sandy blond hair, heaving stomach that rose and fell with each breath like a sleeping animal, and big fingers too thick to put through the tiny handle of his tea cup, was in the middle of saying:

“…and Roosevelt took a hundred thousand dollar campaign contribution from Standard Oil for his republican fund in 1904. It took us seven years, but we put a president before a senate investigation committee, so surely we can--”

“Yes,” Coughlin, the second U.S. attorney chimed in with his nasally breath. “If presidential timber can be chopped in this country--”

“We ought to be able to nab one small fry election rigger,” Otis Clancy continued nearly simultaneously, finishing his original thought.
“That’s right, and we will,” Sorensen added and turned to Roy Towl. “Before you boys got here, I was telling Otis and Champ what a fine job you and Mr. Butler have been doing on our man Dennison, which is why I wanted you brought in on our little operation here.”

“Yes. And it seems that Mr. Dennison has been associating with another Tom, Mr. Tom Pendergast of Kansas City,” Otis said and flung three photographs on the table in front of the detectives--photographs of which showed Dennison and Pendergast socializing together outside of Pendergast’s West Bottom headquarters, The Jackson Democratic Club of Kansas City.

“Those pictures were taken this past spring,” Coughlin said.

Roy picked up one of the photographs. “Yes. We witnessed these two men in cahoots together just last week, in fact.”

“Yes,” Otis said. “We know. We read your report on Dennison, every word of it in fact. That was some fine work.”

“Very fine,” Coughlin added. “And it was through this Pendergast that we were alerted to Dennison’s existence in the first place. We’ve been investigating his Kansas City outfit for some time.”

“Working him on voter fraud, too,” Otis said.

“And when we called Christian here,” Coughlin said, nodding at district attorney Sorensen, “asking if he knew of this Dennison character, he was about stuttering on the phone out of excitement. He mentioned both of you gentlemen right away.”

Roy sat forward and flicked a bit of cigarette ash into a glass tray. “Well, I’m not sure how much help we could be to you fellas. Truth is we haven’t been keeping a regular eye on Dennison these past couple months. We’ve been going after his books--”

“His financial records,” Daniel interrupted.
“Which was a dead end,” Roy added without skipping a beat, “just like all the rest. Truth be told, it’s been six months and we’ve about exhausted every possible avenue we can take in getting to the man. So If electoral fraud is your aim—”

“Exhausted, you say? Maybe so.” Coughlin interrupted again. “As private investigators, anyway.”

“But as federal agents?” Otis said.

A heavy pause filled the room. Sorensen grinned.

“Are you offering us a job?” Roy asked, squinting through his rimless glasses.

Otis smiled. “Say we are. What would you boys say to becoming employees of your country’s government?”

“Well,” Roy said and nervously rubbed the leaf of one of the banana palms next to his seat on the couch. “Arresting the man is one thing. Having anything worth trying him for that would actually stick in court is entirely another.”

“It doesn’t need to stick,” Sorensen said. “It only needs to be sticky.”

Otis heaved another deep breath, his arms crossed over his big stomach. “We’re not concerned about how this holds up in a court of law. What we’re aiming for is the court of public opinion.”

“Even so, what kind of judge would take the case?” Daniel asked as he leaned over to the small table in front of him and stirred milk into his coffee until it was yellow. “Dennison pays for half of their mortgages. The other half are too timid to take a bribe, but they’re also too timid to actually do anything about it.”
Sorensen, his cheeks full of glad color, leaned his head all the way back on his sofa and called out into the other room as if hollering for an absent waiter. “Charles?” He paused and then yelled again. “Charles, come on out here and say hello to our government’s newest employees.”

After a moment, from the adjacent sitting room, Charles Foster--district six judge and nephew of George Lapidus--entered the meeting, dressed in a yellow turtleneck sweater and holding a plate of half-eaten toast.

“Boys,” Sorensen said and stood to make the introductions. “I want you to meet Charles Foster. Judge Foster, this is Roy Towl and Daniel Butler.”

The three men took turns exchanging handshakes.

Sitting back down on the couch, Roy asked, “I don’t mean to sound faithless, Judge, but are you aware of the type of man you have agreed to lock horns with?”

“More than you know,” Foster said, chomping on the dry toast and still standing. “I’ve been kidnapped, held at gunpoint, had my family threatened. My children. And all of it over a bit of busted-up gambling. The man is not a criminal. He is evil incarnate.”

Roy shook his head. “But we’re not going after his gambling outfits, are we?”

“Wrong,” Sorensen said. “We’re going after all of it. But to take down a giant, you don’t stand toe to toe with him and swing at his head. You go after his ankles.”

“Get rid of his election rigging and you take everything else with it,” Otis said. “The prostitution, the violence, the liquor. It will all come tumbling down.”

Foster set down his toast plate on the arm of the sofa. “The man is so corrupt it is a disgrace to American civilization. He’s done everything but poison my soup and shoot up my house.”
“You have carte blanche on this,” Sorensen said to Roy and Daniel. “So long as you don’t interfere with any of Dennison’s operations leading up to election day.”

“Yes, let him carry on his vice uninterrupted until the eleventh hour,” Foster interjected. “We don’t want a clean election. We want a dirty trial.”

“Put his feet to the hot coals of a grand jury,” Otis added.

“Dennison knows who we are,” Roy said and gestured at Daniel. “We won’t be able to get within a half a block of him without him knowing it.”

Sorensen chuckled. “You’re not understanding us. We’re not asking you to shadow the man. Not anymore. We’re asking you to kick his door down.”

“No more field glasses,” Champ Coughlin added, his tea cup ringing out as he set it back onto its saucer with a clank. “No more sitting around in cars.”

“Yes, gentlemen. The time has come for action,” Sorensen said with an air of finality. “The time for study has passed.”

So it was as Tom was being led out of his Riverside Inn in a pair of manacles by Daniel Butler on Election Night, that the two detectives--now special agents for the office of the inspector general--had, after six long months, finally gotten their man. A new snow was falling, light and wet. The smell of vinegar and copper was thick in the winter air from the neighboring factories. The other officers had cleared out the building and were padlocking the front doors while the occupants who’d just been forced off the premises--more than thirty gamblers and fifteen election workers--stood around in the snow. Some of them had vehicles. Most would be walking back into town through the cold. No one else besides Tom--not even Billy Nesselhous or county commissioner John Lynch--were arrested. All the ballot boxes, ticker tape machines,
ledger books, and other financial records were taken into evidence after the basement was fully photographed.

As Daniel Butler walked Tom into the parking lot and crouched him down into the backseat of one of the paddy wagons, Roy Towl stood by with a short smile. One of the regular officers in the driver’s seat cranked the van, clicked on the headlamps, and put it into reverse gear.

After Tom was seated in the back of the paddy--he’d taken the arrest without a struggle--he looked at Agent Towl who was standing outside the van door. “Boy, you weren’t fooling when you said you liked to take your time with things.”

“Beware the fury of the patient man,” Roy said.

“Who said that?”

“John Dryden.”

“Wow,” Tom replied, genuinely impressed. “You see, you might just be a genius after all. But it’s too bad for as smart as you are that you aren’t dumb enough to like money. I could use a man like you.”

Roy stepped up to the van’s rear window and placed his hand on the roof. “I told you that you’d try to bribe me one day.”

Tom squinted one eye. “No, now, if I recollect right, you said one day you’d make me uncomfortable.”

“Well, are you?”

“Not in the slightest,” Tom smiled and sat back against the bench seat. “Alright, driver, off we go to county court. I got me a few pals there I’ve been meaning to say hello to anyway.”
The officer at the wheel gassed the acceleration slightly, anxious to depart. Roy put up his hand to stall him for one moment. “You’re not going to county, Mr. Dennison. You’re headed to the federal building. Have you any friends there?”

“One or two,” Tom said and winked.

“You’re going to need more than that,” Roy said, instructed Butler to get in the backseat with Dennison to insure his delivery to the federal building, and then waved for the driver to leave. With a jolt the police van kicked backwards, reversed out of the parking lot and drove away. The following morning, despite Tom’s arrest, the news became official that the Dahlman ticket--known informally as the “Square Seven”--had won all of the commission postings and Dahlman himself, the cowboy mayor, the perpetual mayor, was to be appointed to his fourth consecutive term.
Chapter Eight: A Case of Electoral Fraud

Dressed in a single-breasted fox hair coat and a green felt hat worn in style with an alpine crease, Tom exited his Panhard and stepped onto the curb in front of the brand new Douglas County Courthouse. Opening only the month before and built in the same location as the previously razed building, it was a four-story piece of French Renaissance Revival constructed of Bedford stone with marble wainscotings.

Tom’s wife and daughter unbuckled themselves from the backseat immediately after him and, together, the Dennison family ascended the stone steps of the courthouse on that, the second day of May, 1916. Tom jammed his hands in his pockets as his lawyer, Morris McNulty, rushed up behind him and whispered into his ear. A hive of newspaper reporters circled around Tom, their paper tablets and short pencils at the ready. He stopped just before the courthouse doors and turned to face the newsboys, his wife and daughter on each side of him. Morris clapped him on the back as if he’d just won the middleweight championship while the press fired off their salvo of questions.

“Whaddaya say, Tom? How are you feeling this morning?” was the first audible question that arose from the chorus.

Tom was all smiles. “As fine as frog’s hair, boys. Even bought me a new coat. I hear the judge is impressed by a feller with money to spare.”

A burst of laughter erupted from the crowd of twenty-plus reporters.

“What about the district attorney? He says he’s got enough dirt on you to put you away for a long time,” another newsman barked.
“It won’t make a particle of difference. What he’s got is lies. Sorensen’s a jealous man. He’s also desperate. Besides, I can take my medicine with the best of them.”

“What my client is trying to say is that this is nothing more than a smear campaign,” Morris added, raising his finger in the air.

“Is it true that the mayor is on your payroll?” a third newsman hollered.

Tom pulled his wife and daughter close for the clicking cameras, one under each arm, the picture of a perfect family. “Absolutely not. I’m loyal to the mayor and subservient to him. Not the other way around.”

“Alright, boys, that’s enough questions this morning,” Morris interjected as the reporters continued to shout out questions. With a smile and a wave, he led the Dennison family into the courthouse atrium where Tom was about to begin the first trial of his life: a federal indictment of electoral fraud.

* * *

Two days later, at three o’clock on the afternoon of May 4th, the peremptory challenges were finished and the jury was finally selected. The twelve men chosen were a cocklebur crowd of farmers, machinists, shopkeepers, and door-to-door salesmen--two of whom wore their overall bibs over their ties because they didn’t own a suit. Following a weekend recess, and at exactly seven months to the day since the incriminating 1915 city elections, both counsels were ready to give their opening statements on a Monday morning glossy with rain.

District attorney Sorensen--with his burnsides facial hair and pince nez clipped to his nose--headed the prosecution team, which included his assistant Bert Stahlmaster and U.S.
attorneys Otis Clancy and Champ Coughlin. On the opposite bench, Morris McNulty sat next to Tom in his usual beige three-piece with his wild red hair mussed up in stylish disarray. The long, pew-like benches of the courtroom, oiled to a reflective glaze, could hold sixty spectators but not a single day of the trial saw the room without at least seventy or more persons. Many of them were the same reporters who flocked around Tom as he entered and left the courthouse every day. Both Judge Foster and the state prosecution were hoping the trial would produce headlines about Tom’s villainy and therefore allowed the media access to the daily proceedings. Also seated in the crowd were Roy Towl and Daniel Butler, both freshly appointed as federal special agents and registered as witnesses for the prosecution.

At nine o’clock sharp, Judge Charles Foster entered the courtroom from his chambers, instructed the bailiff to bring in the jury, and momentarily glanced at Tom who was smiling wholeheartedly and even winked in the judge’s direction as he sounded his mallet, opening the official start of the trial.

“Mr. Sorensen, is the prosecution ready to begin?” Foster asked.

“Yes, your honor,” Sorensen said. He approached the jury box and began outlining his case against the Dennison machine, gyrating his hands wildly as he spoke. Rain clicked against the tall window panes. The stenotype reporter captured his every word on her standalone tape machine. After nearly fifteen minutes of posturing and pontificating about the purity of the ballot and Dennison’s defilement of the most sacred right in the whole constitution, he closed his opening argument by saying:

“Fraud exists in the city on a huge scale and the ringleader of that fraud is sitting right there, twenty feet away.” He paused and pointed at Tom. “Forging votes is a franchise in this city. It is an extremely lucrative business. It funds every other type of vice Omaha has to offer.
But you have a great chance here, gentlemen. You have the responsibility here today and in the next few weeks to put a tourniquet on the lifeblood of political bossism forever. Take away Mr. Dennison’s political syndicate and the rest of it, the prostitution, the violence, the gambling, the drinking, it will all come tumbling down. In the coming days I will prove to you without a doubt that his corruption runs so deep that a man can’t get a job in this city without his blessing, be it pushing a broom or sitting in city hall.

“This is a great country, the best country in the whole world because it is a free country. But not Omaha. There is no constitution here. No freedom of choice. It is a dictatorship and that dictator is sitting right there smiling in his animal fur and forty-dollar suit paid for by your votes. He is nothing more than a thug who has finagled his way into politics. He’s a political bully of the worst water who inserts his friends into office by the fear of his guns and takes away the single-greatest power we as citizens of this city possess by the depth of his pocketbook. But we can end that all right here in this very room. That is your charge, gentlemen. To put the freedom back into this city and take it away from Dennison and his violent machine.” Sorensen thanked the jury for their attention, returned to his table, and gulped down a glass of water.

When he looked across to the defense table, he saw Tom smiling and smiling as if every inflammatory accusation he’d made, as if the entire list of all his alleged criminality, now finally voiced out loud, amused him better than a minstrel show.

In turn, at the direction of Judge Foster, Morris rose from his seat and began his first address to the court with a stab at Sorensen himself: “Mr. Sorensen, let me begin by asking you question. You have been the state’s district attorney for the past nine years, have you not?”

“Counselor, this is not the time for questioning,” Judge Foster interrupted. “You understand how a trial works, do you not? Either you have an opening statement or--”
“This is my opening statement, your honor,” Morris said, jingling coins in his trouser pocket as he paced the well of the courtroom. His appearance was nearly clownish--his mussed red hair, his baggy white suit pants that were so long they touched the floor past his shoe soles, his droopy eyelids that gave him a perpetual look of drossiness, and his long gold watch chain that looped down to his knees--but his voice was clear and sharp, his diction perfectly annunciated.

“It is a rhetorical question,” he continued. “I am not asking the prosecution to answer anything because I already have the answer. Mr. Sorensen has been Nebraska’s district attorney in Omaha for three consecutive terms, holding that office since May of 1907. What I would like to share with the jury, in case they are unaware, is that his position is an elected office. This same elected official just spent the better part of the last half hour asserting in so much varied and garbled vocabulary that my client is a kingmaker who controls every facet of our city’s government. To that I wonder how a man who so vehemently opposes him could hold one of the positions he alleges Mr. Dennison controls. And not just for one term, but three. That’s a mighty long tenure for a man who claims no man can get a job in this city without my client’s blessing. So let me assure you, if what attorney Sorensen said is true about Mr. Dennison, if he was a dictator as the prosecution will continue to assert, you would not be sitting here in this jury box listening to me to defend him.

“Now, gentlemen of the jury, in the coming days you are going to hear more of this lumpen nonsense about how Thomas Dennison has fitted Mayor Dahlman and his democratic ticket into office for four terms in a row and how that kind of record can only be obtained through illegal means, as if longevity in politics is synonymous with foul play. But let me remind you here that the very man making such claims is the same man who has held his own elected
office for nearly the whole of the last decade without interruption. You will also hear something else from the prosecution, that Mr. Dennison is a criminal who operates brothels, gambling halls, and all other manner of racketeering that has absolutely nothing do with the current charges. And you know why you will hear such flimflammetry? I will give you two reasons. First, because they do not have any proof of such illegality and hope to sneak it into these proceedings as one umbrella conspiracy. So every time you hear Mr. Sorensen beg you to end Mr. Dennison’s criminal ring of prostitution and gambling, ask yourselves this--why is he not on trial for those activities? Your answer lies in the question itself.” Morris paused, drew a deep breath, ran his hand through his hair, and quickly referenced his speech notes on a dime store notepad.

“The second reason is because the district attorney and his team want such chicanery in their newspapers. Look around at this courtroom, gentlemen.” He paused and waved his outstretch arm across the length of the room.

“By my count there are over thirty members of the press here today. They have been allowed inside a private citizen’s trial because the prosecution isn’t hoping for a conviction because they know they will not get one. They don’t have the evidence for it. All they want is to publicly defile my client’s name and wage a campaign of equally embellished and derogatory newspaper headlines. What is the goal of such tactics, you ask? Simply, it is a last-ditch effort by the Republicans to take back city hall. This is not a case of electoral fraud. It is a political maneuver to get their half back in the mayor’s office, and a desperate one at that. They can’t win an election at the polls, so they’re taking it here to the courts. They will claim that Mr. Dennison has violated the constitution. But this entire trial and the motivations of the prosecution are the real violation. And like I said before, what they will present to you is not evidence, but hearsay that will make good ink and move a lot of papers. You’ve already heard such language from the
district attorney. Oh yes, he speaks in exclamations and pounds his fist in his hand and talks of accusations without documentation. These are the oratory skills of a man who is all whistle and no kettle. And trials are not won by sermonizing or catchy captions. They are won by the careful weighing of evidence. They are not won by what is belief, but by what is truth. And that is all I will ask of you, gentlemen. To consider the truth founded by evidence and not to be swayed by postulation or pleas that are not fully backed by such evidence.” Morris rubbed one hand against the other to emphasize the word, thereby finishing his own opening statement and thanking the jury for their good attention.

Upon returning to his seat--just as Judge Foster was announcing that court would resume at ten o’clock tomorrow morning with the prosecution’s first witness--Tom leaned over to him and said, “Nice work, counselor. You must have hit the thesaurus pretty hard last night.”

“To match wits you got to have wits,” Morris whispered back, patted Tom on the knee, bent his head closer to his ear and said, “We got this one in the bag.”

* * *

Later that evening, in the Goff Café, Judge Foster sat up along the bar counter in one of the swivel stools bolted to the floor, masticating two pieces of fried chicken and swilling his fifth bottle of Blatz beer. Two empty shot glasses rested next to his plate. He was drunk and sweating through his shirt collar. When he was done sucking the meat off the bones, he ordered a slice of rhubarb pie a la mode and a coffee with a whiskey back as Dr. Jack Broomfield entered the café and took up the stool next to him despite the fact the entire counter was empty. Dressed impeccably as always in a pastel pink sport shirt, a metal green tie and a high crown hat that fit
as smoothly as a cigar band around his head, the doctor sat his folded newspaper on the counter and ordered a bottle of Orange-Chavey from the wedge-capped barman.

Without looking up from his dessert, which he was forking up in huge mouthfuls before the swallowing the previous one, Foster said out loud, as if talking to himself: “A night as slow as this and some coon has got to nestle up next to me?”

Broomfield lit a cigarette and played with the copper ashtray in front of him, but did not dignify the judge with a response.

“You hear what I said, nigger? There are other stools in here.”

Broomfield eyed the empty bar top, but didn’t move from his seat. Neither man had looked at each other and, without even the smallest reaction to Foster’s racist taunt, Broomfield opened his day old newspaper--a copy of the Friday evening edition of The Bee--with a loud ruffle and began to scan its articles.

Judge Foster clanked his fork down on his glass plate and looked over at the bartender. “You know, Bindy, this used to be a classy place. What the hell happened to it? Just let anywhere in here these days, do you?”

“Anyone who can afford to pay,” the barkeep replied, drying the inside of a beer mug with a white towel.

Foster turned to Broomfield. “Yeah, pretty well dressed for a nigger.”

The doctor cleared his throat and sighed, his paper opened to page three.

“Got something to say there? What, you don’t like being called a nigger?”

Broomfield, continuing to peruse the paper, replied, “I wasn’t reacting to you, sir. I do beg your pardon. It’s just this election fraud trial, have you been keeping up on this? They got this judge from district six running the show even though the charges, at least from what this
paper says, all take place outside of that jurisdiction. Now, I’m no lawyer, but it seems to me that this kind of thing reeks of a set-up. What’d the paper say his name was?” Broomfield paused and feigned skimming through the article with his index finger. “Here it is. Foster’s his name. A police magistrate no less. Do you know this man, this Judge Foster?”

Foster stopped eating and stared at the doctor. He then looked about the café--no one else was in the place, not even for a Saturday when business was usually streaming through the doors. Broomfield had still not given him the courtesy of looking him in the eye.

“Do you know who I am?” Broomfield asked.

Foster dumped the whiskey in his coffee and took a healthy slug. As he was about to respond, two large black men--Broomfield’s body guards--entered the café through the back doors and stood at the rear of the restaurant.

“Perhaps that’s irrelevant. But in case you’re still wondering, let me just say that I am not here on behalf of who you think I may or may not be working for. I am here of my own accord. A lot of people say you are a smart man. Well, if them folks are right, if you’re smart, you’ll never have to know who I am at all,” Broomfield said, flung a bill out of his pocket to pay for his Chavey, tucked something small inside the fold of his newspaper, and slid it across the counter as he stood to leave. “You enjoy the rest of your pie, now.”

After the doctor and his bodyguards had left the restaurant, Foster opened the day old newspaper and saw what Broomfield had tucked inside its pages: a single .22 caliber bullet on the headline that declared, “Jury Set for Dennison Fraud Trial.”

* * *

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At ten o’clock the next morning, Morris McNulty entered the courtroom and saw his client already seated alone at the defense table, dressed in a loud tangerine orange suit and fawn-colored fedora. He dumped his leather suitcase and stack of books on the tabletop. “This is how you dress for court?”

Tom fanned out his lapels. “What’s wrong with it? It’s spiffy.”

“It’s cheerful, but this ain’t Easter dinner. It’s your trial.”

“Right. My trial. Not my funeral.”

Morris plopped down in his chair. “Well, do me a favor and wear dark colors from now on. You’re supposed to look sad.”

“People who look sad look guilty,” Tom replied as the county clerk announced—All rise, Case 3158, State of Nebraska against Thomas Dennison, the honorable Judge Foster presiding.

Everyone in the courtroom stood as the judge entered from his chambers with his head bowed and his usual vibrant color drained from his face.

“Boy, the judge sure looks shaken up,” Morris whispered as everyone in the court once again took their seats.

Tom grinned.

“He looks like somebody might’ve gotten to him,” Morris continued even more quietly, a nervous inflection in his voice.

“Maybe somebody did,” Tom said through the side of his mouth.

Morris pulled his chair close. “Goddamnit, Tom. You can’t cowboy your way out of this one. Those are federal agents and big wig attorneys across the way. If they get one sniff that you’ve—” but he was cut short from scolding his client as the judge pounded his gavel and the first day of witness testimony commenced.
Despite all of Morris’s certainty that Sorensen and his pack of government tintypes, as he called them (every day each of them was dressed in some shade of silver or gray suit), had no evidence to connect Tom with the fraud of last year’s city elections, they still managed to scrap together a fairly compelling case. While Tom employed Morris as his sole lawyer, Sorensen’s team of four proved to be diligent when it came to going through the yards of election rolls that piled up on their examination table at such heights their heads were barely visible above the stacks. Sorensen referenced the voting numbers often and, at one point, presented a staggering number to the court in the middle of a witness examination, stating:

“The skewering of these numbers is not just overwhelming, but sloppy. I have here,” he said in his usual blustery tone, patting the sheets with the flat of his hand, “an election roll taken from the Tangney House in the third ward, a known Dennison-run polling place. According to these figures, seventy-seven registered voters claimed to all be living in a one-bedroom apartment at 1603 Farnam.”

Tom let out an immediate burst of laughter upon hearing the ridiculous figure and, just as quickly, Morris squeezed his knee in attempt to control his client.

“Something humorous about this, Mr. Dennison?” Sorensen asked.

Tom shook his head, still smiling. “That’s a big apartment.”

“It would have to be, yes. Sadly, there is no apartment at that address. 1603 Farnam is the location of the Farrell Syrup Company, a company owned by,” Sorensen paused, flipped through the papers. “By you, Mr. Dennison. Tell me, are you still amused?”

“Objection. My client is not on the stand,” Morris said.

“Of course,” Sorensen said quickly before Judge Foster could rule on the request. “But he will be soon enough and I, for one, am very much looking forward to that conversation. Now, to
continue, election judges in the second, third and fourth wards are all mysteriously employees of Mr. Dennison’s Florence water works facility and filtration plant.”


“Overruled,” the judge replied. “So long as the prosecution can provide proof of such employment.”

“I have it right here, your honor,” Sorensen said and placed a folder containing a copy of the records on the judge’s bench. “Every single election judge and ballot counter working in one of these three wards got that position because they’re employees of the water department, which Mr. Dennison purchased in March of 1915 for 366,000 dollars.”

“Objection. Narrative,” Morris interrupted again. “Your honor, is the prosecution going to ask their witness a question anytime in the near future or is Mr. Sorensen going to be allowed to bark out inconsequential and rambling statistics for the rest of the day?”

“Sustained. Counsel, you have called your own witness here to testify, so I urge you not to waste his time or the court’s.”

“Of course, your honor. I am getting to the question. It is a long question.”

“Make it shorter,” Foster demanded.

Sorensen nodded and redirected his attention back to the man sitting in the witness box--Albert Shannon, a Republican official who had monitored the polling station at the First National Bank building on both registration and election day. Weather-beaten, sixty-four years old, and dressed in dun-colored corduroy suit, Shannon was a one-time first ward councilman who had lost the job after Tom gave it over to one of Mayor Dahlman’s poker buddies and was now compelled to testify on behalf of the prosecution.
“Mr. Shannon,” Sorensen said as he approached the stand, “you have been an election official for quite some time now, have you not?”

“Yes, sir. Twenty-three years.”

“Twenty-three. That’s quite the chunk. So, with that kind of experience, are you confident you could tell the difference between a fake ballot box and a real one?”

“Absolutely I could.”

“Marvelous, because I have two such boxes here today,” Sorensen said and his assistant Stahlmaster brought forth two nearly identical ballot boxes to the evidence table for Shannon’s observation.

Tom nudged his attorney discreetly. “What the hell is this? Tell me you’re prepared for this.”

“Relax, I’ll tear him apart with one question,” Morris said just as Sorensen was beginning to account for the props.

“I would like these two boxes to be entered as evidence articles B4 and B5. Both were used in the November city elections. One was taken from the twelfth ward and is a real ballot box. The other comes from the ninth precinct of the third ward and is a rigged replica. Now, before I ask Mr. Shannon’s opinion about these boxes, I would like to point out to the jury their nearly identical nature. Both boxes are crafted from birch wood, both are two feet tall, fourteen inches wide and even possess the painstaking detail of similar scratches and peeling paint,” Sorensen said as skimmed his fingers over the tops of his two newest pieces of evidence. “But one was filled with actual ballots cast by voters, the other with prefabricated ones. So, Mr. Shannon, considering your expertise and experience, can you tell me which is which?”

“I could, yes. But not by sight alone.”
“Oh? How is that?”

“Well, may I?” Shannon said and gestured as if wanting to stand and examine the boxes by hand.

Sorensen looked to Judge Foster, who nodded his approval. “I’ll allow it.”

At that, Shannon stepped out of the witness stand and turned over each box on the table. The bottom of the first box did not budge, but the bottom of the second box was easily removed like a shelf rack. Sorensen thanked him, asked him to return to the witness stand, and held up the false bottom for the jury to see. “So we have our culprit. A trapdoor bottom. Tell me, Mr. Shannon, how does this piece of carpentry equivocate voter fraud?”

“Well, you see, when the polls close, a city official comes by and seals the tops of the boxes with a government seal.”

“Could you describe for the jury this seal?”

“It’s simple, really. It’s wax paper with a stamp. It is meant to prevent ballot stuffing. But a box with a removable bottom could be tampered with after the city official seals it.”

“And you’ve witnessed such tampering first hand?”

“Objection, leading,” Morris said.

“Overruled. The witness will answer the question.”

“Yes,” Shannon said. “I have. On multiple occasions.”

“And yet you did nothing to stop it?”

“I didn’t. I’m not proud of it.”

“And why did you fail to act when witnessing such fraud?”

“Objection, your honor,” Morris pleaded. “He is leading the damn witness.”
“Overruled again, counselor. There is nothing leading about this and you will refrain from using cursory language when addressing this court.”

“Mr. Shannon?” Sorensen urged after the judge’s ruling.

“I was afraid.”

“And why were you afraid?”

“Christ!” Morris said and slapped his table. “Objection! That’s leading, assuming facts not in evidence and calling for a conclusion.”

“What did I tell you about your language, Mr. McNulty? If I have to ask you one more time to refrain from obscenities in my court I will have you held in contempt,” Judge Foster said sharply. “Mr. Shannon, you may answer.”

“I was afraid because they use ruffians to intimidate folks. They threatened me.”

“Who threatened you?”

“Tom’s fellas.”

“You mean men who worked for Mr. Dennison?”

“Yes. His lackeys. Police, too.”

“The police threatened you? How so?”

“They told me that if I stuck my nose in they would take me for a ride. I was cursed at, spit on, even slapped once. These men, they know where I live. Where my family lives. They’ll stop at nothing,” Shannon said, finally coaxed into animation. “But all this nonsense about them buying votes, that’s not true. They don’t have to buy them. They get ‘em for free.”

“Thank you, Mr. Shannon. No more questions, your honor.”

“Would the defense care to cross-examine?” Judge Foster asked.
Rising from his chair next to Tom, Morris rubbed his vested stomach and stepped forward to the lectern. He paused to wipe the lenses of his wire-rimmed spectacles with a handkerchief. Without replacing them on his face, he wagged them about as he began his line of questioning. “Mr. Shannon, in all your time as a Republican election official, have you ever once seen my client, Mr. Dennison, at one of your polling stations?”

“Not personally, no.”

“Have you ever received orders or threats from Mr. Dennison himself?”

“No, I haven’t, but--”

“Mr. Shannon,” Morris interrupted. “Have you ever even met Mr. Dennison before?”

“Well, yes. Of course. A couple of times.”

“And were these long meetings or were they more of a passing nature?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, did you ever sit down and have a lengthy conversation with my client or were the couple times you’ve actually met him more of a, how should I say it, a howdy-do and a handshake and a have-a-good-day kind of dialogue?”

“They were informal, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Yes. Informal. That’s exactly the word I was looking for. In fact, Mr. Dennison has never had any conversation with you about politics of any kind, isn’t that correct?”

“Well, yes, I suppose.”

“Either he has or he hasn’t.”

“No. I’ve never discussed politics with the man, but--”

“And yet despite your obvious unfamiliarity with Mr. Dennison and in all your years as an election official who claims to have been threatened, assaulted, and to have witnessed
multiple instances of fraud, you seem mighty certain that he is the force behind such atrocities. So tell me, because I am sure I am missing something, how is that a man who has only spoken with my client informally can be so sure that the men who directly committed these acts were in his employ?”

Shannon considered his answer briefly, swallowing hard. “Everyone knows who works for Tom. It’s no secret.”

“Ahh, everyone knows. That seems very solid to me.”

“Objection,” Sorensen said. “Badgering the witness.”

“Sustained.”

“Noted, your honor. I will rephrase. Mr. Shannon, you just gave testimony under oath that you knew, without a doubt, the fraud you witnessed and the intimidation you suffered was dealt out at the hands of men working for Mr. Dennison because ‘everyone knows who works him’? Well, forgive me, sir, but that sounds more like scant rumor than it does actual knowledge of anything.”

Morris then waited for a moment, giving Shannon time to reply. When he couldn’t muster a response, Morris said, “Your honor, considering the lack of firsthand knowledge of this witness’s familiarity with Mr. Dennison’s relation to the accusations at hand, I would ask that his testimony about my client’s involvement with such fraud be stricken from the record on the grounds that it is hearsay and conjecture.”

“Mr. Shannon, is there anything you can add that would directly relate the defendant with the fraud you personally observed?” Judge Foster asked.

“Well, not precisely. Not on paper, no. But I do know.”
“Well, it’s one thing to assume you know something and it is entirely another to prove it by fact,” Judge Foster said. “I am quite certain, Mr. Shannon, that you are convinced of that truth, but I must side with the defense unless of course you can add anything else to your testimony here that would verify your claims.”

The witness sat silent on the stand, working his adam’s apple up and down.

“Mr. Shannon?”

“No, your honor. Not at this moment, I cannot.”

The judge then turned to the prosecution table. “Mr. Sorensen?”

Sorensen, fuming, put his hands up in the air in a sign of defeat, palms out.

Judge Foster nodded to himself and ruled: “The jury will then be advised not to consider the testimony of Albert Shannon regarding Mr. Dennison’s involvement, direct or otherwise, with the fraudulence he has described to the court.”

Sorensen jumped out of his chair. “Your honor--”

“I wasn’t finished, counselman. Mr. Shannon of course will be allowed to reappear as a rebuttal witness for further questioning if he can produce some kind of proof that links what he witnessed with the defendant. If he cannot, such testimony is unsubstantiated and I will not allow circumstantial evidence in my court.” The judge turned again to the jury. “So I remind you that what you just heard from Mr. Shannon will bear no weight in this case for the time being. Wipe it from your minds. And, with that, it’s time for our lunch recess. Court will resume promptly at two o’clock.” Judge Foster gavled the midday break.

Albert Shannon never reappeared on the stand again.

* * *
Four nights after the trial began, shortly before midnight on May 12, a royal blue Packard limousine idled with its headlamps out at the curbstone in front of the Paxton Hotel. A soft rain pattered on the canvas roof, but the windshield blades were silent. Outside, a woman struggled with an umbrella blown inside out by a gust of wind and a crook of blue lightning zigzagged to the horizon.

Through the dark glass sat the shadows of four fedora-hatted heads--two in the front, two in the back--one of whom handed a thick package wrapped in old newspaper to the man in the driver side seat. After a moment the Hoffmann brothers exited the Packard with the parcel in hand. They both wore rubberized rain coats with the collars flared up to keep their necks dry. They walked around to the back door of the hotel restaurant, stepping over the puddles along the way, then through the dark of the dining room tables that were already place set with damask tablecloths and bone china for tomorrow’s breakfast, up the rear carpeted stairwell to the third floor rooms, and knocked on the door at the end of the hallway.

The door opened a crack, the chain lock still in place. The man behind the door was Herbert Warren--a soybean farmer from Valentine, Nebraska, and juror number seven for the Dennison trial. Milton handed him the newspaper bundle through the opening but said nothing during the exchange, for nothing needed to be said as the terms of the delivery were already established. After both Milton and Chip were tucked back in the Packard and driving away through the thickening rain, Herbert sat at a small table next to his bed in suite 307 staring at the package. Finally he unwrapped the newspaper. Inside was a banded stack of blue seal bills: a total of five thousand dollars, more than enough to see his family through the coming year, a
year in which the forecasted value for cash corn and soybeans was projected to reach an all-time low of four and half dollars a bushel.

* * *

Exactly two weeks since the start of the trial, Tom Dennison was finally called to the stand as a witness. Before that, Roy Towl had given his testimony the previous morning with attorney Sorensen making it perfectly clear to the jury that he was federal agent who’d been investigating electoral conditions in Omaha.

When asked to give his summation of what he’d observed during last year’s elections, Roy responded: “Omaha has the most effective and the most daring organization for carrying on election fraud I have ever seen.”

“An organization, you say?” Sorensen asked.

“Yes. Mr. Dennison’s organization.”

“Agent Towl, could you give this court any particular details about the specific types of voter fraud you witnessed while serving as a federal investigator?”

“Whole heaps of it. They forged votes constantly. That fake ballot box you presented to the court early last week? There were at least fifty such boxes in operation to my count. In one particular box from the St. Edward’s Fire Station in the third ward--”

“This fire station being a polling place?” Sorensen interrupted.

“Yes, it was a polling place. And in one of the boxes we confiscated from that sight, the total ballots cast favored the Dahlman ticket at a count of 899 to 1.”

“899 to 1? That kind of number seems mighty suspicious, wouldn’t you say?”
“Objection, leading,” Morris pleaded half-heartedly, almost sleepily, as he knew it would be overruled, which it was.

“It was suspicious, yes,” Roy continued. “But suspicion is an unconfirmed prejudice. Suspicion is only an inkling. What was not suspicion is that the polling book taken from that very same fire station only logged 230 voters. Not 900.”

Sorensen smiled widely. “That’s a difference of 670 ballots, more than double the actual number of flesh-and-blood people who physically came into that fire station to cast their vote. Correct?”

“Yes, sir. That’s correct.”

“Objection,” Morris said again.

“On what ground, counselor?” Judge Foster asked.

Morris tossed his pen on the table. “Everything,” he said in an exasperated voice, drawing a few isolated murmurs of laughter from the crowd.

“Mr. Morris, since you find yourself in a good humor this morning, let me give you something that is not funny--if you so much as open your mouth one more time during this line of questioning, I will have the bailiff hold you in contempt, is that understood?”

Morris nodded and Sorensen continued his examination:

“That’s okay, your honor. I only have one more question before the defense gets their chance. Mr. Towl, what would you say accounts for the large discrepancy between the ballots in that box and the names signed on that polling ledger?”

“Nothing more than outright thievery. If you took away all the fraudulent ballots from last year’s city elections, you would see the polls actually mark a very close contest, a contest
Dennison and his machine probably would’ve lost,” Roy said firmly, ending Sorensen’s half of the questioning.

During his cross-examination, Morris kept his inquiries short.

“Mr. Towl.” He rose from his chair. “You are a federal agent appointed by the recommendation of U.S. attorneys Clancy and Coughlin, are you not?” he said, pointing at the two attorneys seated next to Sorensen at the prosecution table.

“Yes, sir.”

“Attorneys who both are a part of the state’s prosecution team in this case?”

“Yes. You can see that.”

“And you earned that position last October? Correct?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And what was your profession previous to that?”

“I was a private investigator.”

“A private investigator?” Morris said, stopped pacing, his hands gripping his blazer lapels, and raised an eyebrow. “You worked for the Allan Pinkerton National Detective Agency, to be more specific. Hmm. Specificity is a curious thing, Mr. Towl. Especially when, just moments ago, you seemed to be very and even openly specific when responding to attorney Sorensen’s questions. But when I ask you a question, all of a sudden you’ve gone and clamed up into vagary?”

“Objection, your honor,” Sorensen said. “The witness has the freedom to answer the questions however he so chooses so long as he tells the truth.”

“The full truth is what the court demands, actually,” Morris interrupted. “Perhaps you missed that part in law school.”
“Sustained,” the judge said, ignoring Morris’s quip. “Mr. McNulty, Roy Towl is not on trial here.”

“Yes, your honor. But the difference as to how the same witness answers questions fielded by the prosecution and questions by the defense cuts right to the heart of my argument,” Morris said and approached the witness box railing. “Mr. Towl, when employed as a detective for the Pinkerton Agency, what was your last working assignment for them before becoming a fancy federal agent?”

Roy paused. “I was working for Mr. Sorensen.”

“Ah. The same Mr. Sorensen who is sitting right over there?”

“Yes.”

“So, by your own admission, in the past year you’ve worked for three of the four members of the prosecution team? Well, golly gee, it’s no wonder you gave them such nice answers and left me with the table scraps. But that’s alright. I’ll get it out of you one way or the other. Tell me, what did you do for Mr. Sorensen?”

“I was hired to investigate Thomas Dennison.”

“You don’t say?” Morris chuckled. “And that appointment began in the spring of 1915. That’s twelve months now you’ve been working on my client.”

“Which makes me an expert on him,” Towl added.

“Perhaps. But it also makes you biased, sir. And it makes this entire prosecution and, therefore, this trial biased as well!”

“Mr. McNulty,” Judge Foster said, but Morris raised his voice before the judge could speak another word, continuing:
“Ladies and Gentlemen! Here you have the truth! The prosecution’s lynchpin witness is their employee and has been for the better part of a year!” Morris declared and pointed his finger at Towl. “This is not impartial justice, but salaried testimony that is bought and paid for out of attorney Sorensen’s own pocketbook!”

“Mr. McNulty!” Judge Foster shouted back and banged his gavel repeatedly. “I want to see you in my chambers right now. Bailiff, remove the jury for a thirty minute recess.” And, with a trite smile and quick wink at Tom, Morris followed the judge into his chambers where he was warned once again about his courtroom behavior.

“You pull anything like that in my courtroom again, and I’ll have your client sent away to Fremont for the maximum sentence the state allows and send the jury home without deliberation,” Foster told Morris. “Do you understand?”

“Of course, your honor. Loud and clear,” Morris replied, but knew he wouldn’t need loudness or clarity of any kind for the rest of trial—he’d done his damage.

So when Tom took the stand the next day, his long awaited testimony—unlike Roy Towl’s—was reserved and even subdued.

Sorensen did his best to spark the fireworks, but couldn’t get a rise out of Tom no matter how he phrased his questions. Dressed conservatively in navy blue serge and a charcoal tie with a white shirt, Tom kept the majority of his responses monotone and clipped until, at last, Sorensen asked him a question point blank:

“Mr. Dennison, knowing that you are under oath, did you or did you not have a hand in stealing votes in last year’s city elections?”

Tom hunched forward in his seat. “Of course I steal votes,” he said and the entire mass of the courtroom let out a gasp.
Sorensen was even taken aback by his answer. “Pardon me, could you repeat that, Mr. Dennison?”

“You could call it stealing, yes. And I’m going to tell you how I do it.”

“Please,” Sorensen smirked. “Please do.”

“It’s perfectly legal. Say a man, a man with a family, say he moves into town looking for work. He and his, they’ve been through hard times. This whole city’s been through the wringer in the last few years, too, not just our new neighbors. So it could be this man who’s just moved here or somebody who’s been living here for twenty years. But they’re in some trouble. They got bills they can’t afford. They can’t pay for their heat or groceries or sometimes even get behind on the rent. Well, one of my men, I send ‘em on over to talk to the man. Get to know him and his family. We ask ‘em what they need. Sometimes it’s thirty dollars to pay for a couple months’ worth of groceries. Sometimes it’s settling a debt for them. It doesn’t matter. We help ‘em out. And we keep in touch. But we never talk politics. Never. No man who works for me ever does. But, you know what? Those we help out, they know who helped them. And it wasn’t the government. It was me. It was my money that gave them a lift. It was my money that helped them survive the winter or avoid a foreclosure. And when they see in the papers who I’m backing for office, well, it’s not hard to tell which way they’re going to vote. There’s no secret pact about it,” Tom said, at last finishing his sole lengthy statement of his entire testimony and watched with a rueful smile as Sorensen’s face twitched.

“Okay, Mr. Dennison. Even if that were true, where exactly do you get your money from? Gambling and prostitution?”

“Object--” Morris started to say, but Tom cut him off.
“It’s alright,” he said, holding up his hand to yield his attorney. “My lawyer is a jumpy man. I’m glad to answer the question. I run an employment agency. And I believe two of my biggest outfits have already been made mention of in this court. The Florence Water Works and The Parks Association. Plus I own percentages of certain other ventures--department stores, hotels, retail, a number of things. I’ve friends in business all over the city. Reason how I can help a fella with a job if he needs one.”

“Yes, but is it also true that you own a number of saloons in this city?”

“Sure, I sell a little alky. But alky is just as legal as milk and the day it ain’t, why, I guess I’ll just sell milk instead,” Tom said, drawing laughter from the crowd and even a few isolated claps of applause which Judge Foster silenced with one bang of his gavel.

“And let me say one other thing,” Tom continued. “You’d think with all the number of folks out of work in this city that I’ve put into work, you’d be giving me a medal rather than this charade. Heck, I’d even be satisfied with a simple Thank You,” Tom said, which garnered his second round of cheers from the crowd.

In turn, Sorensen--knowing now that the longer he kept Tom on the stand, the more he was losing the trial--thanked Tom quickly and returned to his seat.

When Judge Foster asked Morris if he’d like the opportunity to cross-examine his client, he responded with a glowing smile: “No, your honor. I believe Mr. Sorensen has done all my work for me today.”

* * *

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As much as Sorensen and the U.S. attorneys had hoped to use the press to vilify Tom and his political cadre, most of the newsboys—even those who didn’t work for The Bee—couldn’t help but be drawn to his quick humor and pragmatic rationale. At the end of each day’s proceedings, as Tom, his family, and Morris exited the courtroom doors, a flock of anxious reporters swirled around him, casting out their questions.

During such exchanges, Tom often slung an arm up on Morris’s shoulder like they were the best of chums, his hat tipped back slightly on his head, painting the picture of a man relaxed and even certain of his trial’s outcome—an outcome which was just as he’d hoped. On May 25th, following eighteen days of litigation, Tom was acquitted of the charges on all counts. After the verdict was handed down and court adjourned on that final day, Tom was once again surrounded by the press in the fourth-floor courtroom hallway as they snapped the dustproof shutters of their roll-type cameras, flashed their camera pans, and lobbed up their questions:

“How does it feel to be a free man, Tom?”

“Same as it did yesterday and the day before that, I suppose,” Tom replied. “I’ve always been innocent, so I’ve never been worried.”

“Is it true that you own over forty illegal gambling halls in the city?”

“Illegal?” Tom repeated the word curiously. “Well, that all depends on what you consider illegal. I’ll tell ya, people are always getting exited about the little things. A dinky crap game or pennyante poker causes a hell of a racket. But the stock market gambling? Well, that’s alright.”

“A whole lot people seem to think you’ve turned this city into a rogue’s haven,” another reporter said, the statement phrased like a question.

“If you consider six blokes to be a whole lot of people, then sure, a lot of people might think so,” Tom said, referring to Sorensen’s legal team, plus Roy Towl and Daniel Butler. “But
four of them don’t even live here. They came over from Washington or Chicago or wherever on
the overnight train and the next morning had already come to the conclusion that Omaha is the
next Gomorrah. But Omaha ain’t their town. A town is what the people want it to be and raiding
crews can’t change what people want. Omaha has always been one of the cleanest towns on the
map. But if it were snow white and everybody went to church and drank nothing but milk and
quit smoking and chewing and quit chasing women, still the reformers would howl.”

“Those were some big enemies to have, though.”

“I still don’t know how they came to be so. Those Washington boys hadn’t even met me
when this all got started, but if they had, they’d be my friends. Every man I meet becomes a pal.”

“Even agents Towl and Butler?”

“Sure. They’re my pals. But, for some reason or another, I ain’t theirs,” Tom said and
earned a round of laughter with the response.

“More importantly, I’m friends with the poor,” he added. “When a poor’n comes to me or
one of my boys for help, we give it. And give freely. We don’t make silly investigations like
those republican charities. I’ve given away more than half of my total income, and I mean half of
every cent I’ve ever made, over to folks who’ll never be able to pay me back and I don’t hold
them to debt. Generosity is the responsibility of the wealthy. It says so right in the holy book.”

“So are you a religious man, Tom?”

“Well, I’m a well-read man, let’s say.”

“What about a political boss? Would you say you’re one of those?”

“Sure. It’s true. But it’s a job like any other and just as legal as any other. But, I’ll tell
you fellers, if I were a boss of a Penny Marshall’s or a Harkett’s Market, there wouldn’t have
been none of this foolishness.”
“Do you feel like you’ve been unfairly scrutinized in this trial?”

“Not in the least. We won, didn’t we? Now Sorensen and his republican bums are really on the outs more than ever. They embarrassed themselves. If I were them, I’d be getting on out of town with my tail tucked between my legs. But if I really had a bone to pick, it’d be with you newspaper fellas. You certainly did your best to help them put out their propaganda, didn’t you? I don’t know who’s who in this crowd, but some of you boys work for *The Herald* and if I’d taken as many blows to the chin as that paper has over the last few years, I’d given up long ago,” Tom said, and what came out of his mouth next would end up being his final utterance and address to the public for the next three years.

For while he’d been acquitted, the trial had largely served its purpose for Sorensen and his bunch. The district attorney still showcased that fraud occurred in the city elections, just not any he could pin on Dennison himself. In the wake of the trial, Sorensen proposed a new office for the election commission. In 1917 it became law--The Honest Election Law--which put elections in Douglas County under the supervision of an official appointed by the Governor’s office, thereby making Omaha’s city elections the jurisdiction of the state itself and effectively ending most of the voter malpractice in the city. Tom, fearing another indictment and paranoid enough to consider himself under regular surveillance, pulled in the reigns on his operations to the point that he was rarely seen in public at all anymore.

Even long down the line, after Judge Foster was found melted to the seat of his Jeffery Four from a clockwork dynamite bomb wired to his ignition three months following the trial, after Lincoln--the state capital--went dry the next year and signaled the origins of what would become the national prohibition movement, after Roy Towl won the appointment as police magistrate in the 1918 elections and Daniel Butler was hired as a homicide detective for the
Omaha police, after Tom’s wife Sue became pregnant with their second child, after President Wilson declared the United States’ entry in World War I following the publication of the Zimmerman telegram, even after all of that, Tom still remained mum until nearly the end of decade when he would finally resurface, and resurface in a flurry. Until then, for a span of almost three years, the last words he gave to the city of Omaha in front of that crowd of adoring newsmen were spoken with the air of supreme confidence, but would end up proving to be a grim forecast of his downfall.

And what he said was this: “All the people of this city have to do to get rid of me is give me one good walloping. Believe you me, I promise you, I won’t stick around where I ain’t wanted.”
Two years later, Tom’s final proclamation at the courthouse turned prophetic, though not in the manner he had hoped. Following the election of 1918 and for the first time in twelve years, he had officially lost his city.

The previous spring, in the same two-month span, America had entered the first great war and the entire state of Nebraska went dry. War headlines trumped local politics in the newspapers on a daily basis. In the two months leading up to Election Day, a slew of updates from the Western Front constantly occupied the front pages. Omaha’s first soldier, Homer McKenzie, was killed in action in the Battle of the Somme. The British were conducting daylight bombings in Cambrai and Lille. French merchant vessels were terrorized by U-boats. Concrete ships which could be built in sixty days instead of six months and cost half the price of steel were filling the oceans as a vital war measure to stand up to the German attacks. The British Army dropped twelve tons of explosives on Zweibrucken.

Narratives about American ambulance men in Paris rescuing the wounded from German night air raids, Austrian airmen who flew 700 miles to bomb Naples, and political cartoons like Uncle Sam spanking a Dutchman bent over his lap with a wooden shoe labeled “Dutch Ships” all monopolized the majority of Omaha’s news pages. Between the war headlines and advertisements for boys’ Easter suits, city politics in the summer of 1918 were often pushed to page ten and no longer than a column or two.

Sensing a real chance at taking back city hall for the first time in over a decade, the Allied candidates--headed by Parsons Smith--tripled their campaign efforts. For three months
everyday before the primaries, Smith gave a series of speeches in front of large crowds—Omaha church leaders, women’s Christian temperance movements, and even to the picket lines of striking stockyard workers and the Amalgamated Association of Street & Electric Railway Employees. Standing six foot four with a booming voice and a cherub-like face, he promised not only to clean up the crime in the downtown wards, but also leaned heavily on the country’s sentiment with the war in Europe:

“Right now, this very instant, the young men of this country are abroad sacrificing their safety to ensure ours,” he proclaimed during his speeches, using the exact same diction in front of every crowd. “They are risking their lives for democracy and yet how can we say we support our young men in that fight, how can we say we stand for democracy at all when we don’t have the courage to take up that same fight ourselves? For years Dennison’s political machine has stripped this city of its freedom while our sons are off dying for it on foreign soil. Let us match their efforts. If you don’t have the courage to cast a vote in the name of freedom, then how can you claim to be a patriot? This country is asking for the ultimate sacrifice of our young men. All I am asking of you is to make sure that when they return from securing freedom on the Western Front, they come home to a city that has done the same for them. But let me be clear about my post. Some say I am part of a moral reform administration. This is not true. I am part of a clean administration, that is all, and that is much more than can be said of the boys in office now.”

Within the next month, the Allied Ticket—which also ran Roy Towl and Daniel Butler as two of their seven candidates—had not only gained ground on Dahlman’s “Square Seven,” they’d surpassed them as frontrunners. Every member of the new reform slate led the incumbents, even in Tom’s third ward. Dahlman had placed tenth in the primaries, three spots out from earning one of the seven city commission postings. Between the nation’s obsession with the war, the onset of
state prohibition, the lack of political support in newspaper coverage and the public clamoring for change, Tom and his ticket faced defeat for the first time in four consecutive terms.

Three weeks before Election Day, at a meeting in the main office of the Omaha Business Men’s Association on the top floor of The Brandeis Building, Tom and Mayor Dahlman gathered ten other men around a pine conference table to discuss their last gasp at retaining city hall.

Among those present, seated in English lounge chairs and mohair suite furniture in a nebula of smoke leaking from penbroke pipes, Piedmont cigarettes, and nickel cigars were: Forrest Brandeis--president of the OBMA, Billy Nesselhous, George Lapidus, J.B. Hummel, Dr. Jack Broomfield, and four of Tom’s ward bosses.

Nebraska was one of the twenty states that had officially gone dry the previous year, but Omaha was as wet as ever. The men in the room openly drank hot toddies in tea cups and whiskers of Canadian whiskey poured into glasses of Golden Jersey milk. Their discussion had been dragging on for four hours as they chewed over their options for a push in the polls when Tom, exhausted by their lack of headway, finally stood from the table and went to the window. He crammed his hands in his pockets as he stared out through the glass. The rest of the men hushed, waiting for him to speak. From his vantage point on the tenth floor of the Brandeis Building, he could see nearly all of downtown clear across the Missouri River and into Iowa.

Looking east to southeast, he viewed the Continental Block at the intersection of 15\textsuperscript{th} and Dodge, the Douglas County Courthouse where he’d originally begun to lose the city in his electoral fraud trial two years earlier, the Omaha Bee building, the six-story limestone U.S. Post Office tower, and every neatly sectioned street in between--streets flooded with the quick black
slashes of speeding automobiles, horse-drawn buggies slumped against curbs, pedestrians, and electric trolleys alike.

Turning back to face the men seated around the office, standing behind his overstuffed Jacquard velour chair, Tom finally said, “I’ve spent nearly thirty years getting this city. We all have to a certain degree or another. But if we can’t control it anymore, then no one else will either.”

Dahlman leaned forward and crossed his hands. He wore a white watchcap under his silverbelly Stetson. “What are you saying, Tom?”

“We’re not going to win this one. Everyone in this room knows that.”

“Now, that’s not for certain,” Nesselhous said. “We can’t overestimate the primaries. There’s no real barometer for measuring this city’s temperature.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” Tom said.

“Bill’s right,” Brandeis added. “What he means is that there are still a lot on our half out there.”

“Really, Forrest? By ‘a lot’ do you mean less than half?” Tom asked.

“I’m talking about voter predilection,” Brandeis jabbed back.

“What did that crape hanger call me?” Tom asked absently with a wry smile, referring to their mayoral competition, Parsons Smith. “A Sabbath-breaker?”

“Among other things,” Lapidus said.

Tom chuckled, though not out of humor. “And this sonofabitch wiped the floor with us in the primaries, how?”

“People want change, no matter what it is,” Lapidus said.
“Not in North Omaha we don’t. And we fifteen-thousand strong. That’s the third largest black population west of the Mississippi,” Broomfield said.

“Listen to this coon with his statistics,” Lapidus teased.

“You want to say that again, George?” Tom snapped. “Do you have fifteen thousand votes stashed somewhere?”

George sunk down in his chair.

“In fact, you can wait outside,” Tom told him, came around to his side of the table, yanked him out of his seat and shoved him toward the door. George paused and straightened his jacket. Tom picked his fedora off the table and threw it at him. George dropped it, picked it back up, squashed it on his head, and silently left the room.

Tom sighed and returned to the window. “Now, what I was saying?”

“We were discussing civic sentiment,” Dahlman said.

“That’s a non-issue,” Tom said. “The real problem is that I let you boys talk me into backing the commission vote.”

“Tom--” Nesselhous began.

Tom turned around. “I wasn’t finished. What’s done is done. But I think we better let the bastards have it their way for awhile.”

“That’s pure nonsense. If we let the outs get in now, we’ll never get it back,” one of Tom’s aldermen--Frank Mueller of the second ward--said.

“There are ways to fix it,” Brandeis said. “Smith’s boys don’t want to play with our boys. Not the rough way, anyhow.”

Tom dunked a molasses cookie into a glass of cold buttermilk. “So I can be sawed up again down at the courthouse? No sir. This time the dirt won’t wash.”
“So we lose the city for a term? So what?” J.B. Hummel said. “Maybe this is a good time to turn our attentions statewide. I know a couple fellers who we could sneak in the backdoor of the capitol. Easy.”

Tom waved off the notion. “I don’t give a hoot about congressmen. If it’s come to that I’d rather have a notary public. A notary public could do me more good.”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Nesselhous said.

“I’m glad you caught onto that, Bill,” Tom replied sharply. “But if we got to go toe-to-toe with these Carrie-Nation-types while there’s a war going on we might as well give it up while it still looks like a choice.”

“Christ, never in all my days did I think I’d hear you knuckle to the church boys,” Dahlman said. “But me? I don’t ask for no quarter and I won’t give no quarter, no sir. We ought to slug those Smith boys. And slug them hard.”

Tom picked up his bowler off the table and ran his fingers over the stiff crease on the brim. “Don’t get any of your fool notions. Listen to your damn self. The Cowboy Mayor and his herdable vote. You want the shepherd’s crook? Keep betting on the even money. But I’m telling you, I’m telling all of you, we let Smith have it now and we’ll be back at the old stand come the next time.”

“We lose it just so we can take it back?” Broomfield cleared his throat.

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do,” Tom said. “We’re going to lie low this election. After Smith and his lilies get into office they’re going to see just how outmatched they are. Trust me, this city will be glad to see us back.”

Even after Tom’s meeting with his business partners, few besides him really believed that Omaha would vote against his ticket. Even when the final results were tabulated and James
Dahlman lost the election by a plurality of over fourteen-thousand votes for the final and seventh spot in the city commission, the cowboy mayor was in denial. In response, Dahlman had tried to restrain the City Election Committee from certifying the new commissioners, but his request was dismissed in Circuit Court. So it was when the votes were tallied early that next month, the Allied Ticket had won six of the seven commission seats. Only J.B. Hummel would survive from the incumbents, placing fifth in the final count and, for the first time since 1906, Omaha was to have a new mayor: Parsons Penn Smith.

When the meeting on the top floor of the Brandeis Building finally ended after six hours of arguing, Tom called down to the lobby desk to have his car brought around. It was six o’clock in the evening and he was going to be late to supper for the first time that year. A roseate sunset colored the sky. Fireflies blinked in the summer dusk, rising from the grass and cracks in the sidewalk. Tom donned his satin-lined velour hat and stepped out onto the sidewalk on Lafayette Street. Waiting for him along the curb was Harry Buford at the wheel of a cream-colored Hudson convertible with the news that Tom’s wife, Sue, wanted him to come home right away.

* * *

At home, Sue was seated in a wicker rocker in parlor room, her arms wrapped around her pregnant belly, two weeks into her third trimester. That past January, Tom had learned he was to be a new father again just after his fifty-ninth birthday. Sue, fifteen years his junior, believed her child-bearing years were over until the morning sicknesses and absent periods returned. Their daughter Francis was in her first year of collegiate study at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln
and both Tom and Sue were hoping for grandchildren in the near future, not another one of their own in the twilight of Sue’s ability to conceive.

An hour before Tom arrived home from his meeting in the Brandeis Building, Sue had woke from her afternoon nap with her undergarments soaked in a clear fluid. Fearing she had wet herself, she placed her fingers on the mess, brought them to her nose and smelled not urine but the scent of something similar to bleach. Her contractions were sharp and close together as she shuffled into the adjoining master bathroom. She tossed her saturated vulva pad into the trash, washed herself over the porcelain bidet, put on a fresh pair of underwear, scrubbed her hands with a cake of black soap in the washbasin, and called Tom’s office where Harry Buford was manning the phones and told him to fetch her husband immediately.

Before Tom had taken off his hat upon entering the house, Sue looked up and said, “The baby’s coming.”

Tom clicked on the tableside lamp and reached for his glasses. “Right now? How do you know?”

Sue flinched again at another burst of pain. “Call Doctor Arnold.”

Tom touched her stomach gently. “I’ll ring for the midwife.”

“No, Tom. Doctor Arnold, I want him.”

“Alright, calm down. I’ll get the doc. Let’s get you bedded down first,” he said and escorted his wife upstairs to the lying-in room that would become the nursery after the baby was born. Already it was filled with a dropside crib, a bassinet and a changing table stocked with stacks of folded cloth diapers and talcum powder. He helped her into the birthing bed they’d prepared for this day, fluffed three pillows under her head, and rang for Doctor Arnold.
Once the physician arrived aboard a hansom cab, he and the midwife—who’d been living in the guest house at the back of their property for the past month to assist Sue with her needs—shut the door and began the process of bringing Tom’s second child into the world. Tom was not allowed inside the room during labor and he paced the upstairs’ hallway while he listened to his wife scream in agony. After half an hour, Doctor Arnold emerged from the room, dressed in his surgical gown and cap.

“Your wife is in a great deal of pain, Mr. Dennison,” he said. “She has a florid complexion, a distended abdomen and puerperal fever. If she continues in this state, such symptoms could be life-threatening.”

“What are you out here for, then? Do something about it, goddamnit.”

“I’ve tried. Your wife refuses to accept any of my—“

“Tom! Tom! Get in here! I want my husband,” Sue cried out from the room.

“I’m going in there,” Tom said. He rushed past the doctor and opened the door. Inside the room he saw his wife sitting in bed over a rolled rubber sheet that funneled her discharges off the mattress to prevent infection. Already a heap of quilts had been tossed into the corner, soaked with blood. A basin tub of pink water rested at the foot of the bed and a retractable table cluttered with tools and half-dram vials was set up near her headrest. The midwife, clothed in a bonnet and gloves, was seated on a tuffet ottoman in front of Sue whose legs were open in the air and cloaked only by a thin white sheet. A coating of mustard plaster was rubbed over her belly and an ice pack was fastened on her forehead with a belt. Doctor Arnold followed Tom inside the room and grabbed a pair of long-handled French forceps from his pedestal table.

“The child needs to be extracted now,” he said.

“You’re not putting that wretched tool inside me,” Sue said.
“You’re frightening her,” Tom told the doctor.

“Of course your wife is scared. She doesn’t know what’s good for her. She is in so much pain she could climb up the wall backwards.”

“Can’t you give her something?” Tom said and knelt down next to the bed to hold Sue’s hand.

“Of course I could. Why, obstetrics is my raison d’être. But she’s also refusing any medicine. Listen, I need to be frank, here.” The doctor took Tom to the far corner of the room where they could talk without Sue hearing. In a hushed voice he said, “If your wife’s fever stays this high, she won’t last through the night. She also has an extremely rapid pulse, which I fear could lead to an onset of sepsis, also life-threatening. Thirdly, the child’s umbilical cord is prolapsed, which means the cord is coming out first, before the fetus. If your wife refuses my use of forceps, I will not take the blame for what might transpire.”

“Listen to me, you are the doctor. You do what you must. You have my full permission. Just do whatever you can within your power to--”

“I would, but there is danger there as well.”

“Yes?”

“Well, I would like to give her some calomel. It’s a chloride of mercury. It will irritate her intestines and cleanse them in favor of asepsis to prevent further infection. If that becomes too much, I can give here a tincture of opium to offset it. A small amount, 15 milliliters.”

“Yes, yes. Fine. Don’t tell me, just do it already.”

“Now, just one moment. I want you to know what I’m doing because if this turns out badly, I don’t want it to sully my good name considering your reach of power. So if you object to any of this, you must say so.”
“Yes, yes.” Tom rushed him.

“Considering your wife’s pain, I suggest emetics. Her convulsions are severe, much more than normal, and they’re interfering with her ability to birth. The emetics will cause her some mild vomiting but will do wonders to relieving her pain.”

“So you want to make her shit and vomit while she’s in labor? That’s your cure? What about blood-letting? Can’t that reduce her pain?”

“Absolutely out of the question. As you can see, she’s already experienced an exuberant amount of blood loss. She could lose consciousness and that would be disastrous. What I do recommend is ergot,” the doctor said and produced a tinted eyedropper bottle from his coat pocket. “It’s a fungal-based alkaloid. A small application of this will help slow the prenatal bleeding, but side effects are hallucinations and nausea.”

“I don’t care if she sees a dragon in the corner of the room, just get her through this alive. And don’t worry about your damn reputation. That is not on the line here. What is on the line are the lives of my wife and child. So you do whatever you deem best and I will stand behind you one-hundred percent,” Tom said, walked over to his wife, planted a kiss on her forehead, told her to do whatever Doctor Arnold instructed and exited the room.

From his bedroom phone, he called his brother John, Billy Nesselhous, and the Hoffmann Brothers to inform them of the news and requested their presence at his home as soon as they could ready themselves. Within the hour, they were sitting with him in his drawing room as Sue continued to fight through her labor upstairs. From his folding liquor cabinet, Tom poured each man a highball glass of Armagnac Brandy and, breaking his usual abstinence, even swallowed a large gulp himself. There was very little conversation had in the room besides a few awkward and somber well-wishes as the men sat around in an uneasy silence, waiting for any news from
the doctor or the first crying sounds of a baby. Tom, sitting on his couch with his head hung in between his knees, finally looked up and said, “Thanks to all of you. I think I’d be losing my mind without you boys being here.”

“Always, Tom. Always here for you. To you, your wife and child,” Nesselhous said. He raised his glass and every man saluted a toast.

Nearly twenty minutes later, Doctor Arnold finally came down the stairs. His surgical gown was slashed with blood as if he had just finished field dressing a buck. All five men stood from their chairs as he entered the parlor.

“Mr. Dennison, I am afraid I bear—” he said, his voice quivering, head bowed. “I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

“Get it to me straight, doc,” Tom said.

“I did all I could, but your wife didn’t make it.”

Milton and Harry came up behind Tom and put their arms behind his back to keep him from collapsing. Half a minute passed in complete silence.

“Sue’s gone?” Tom finally asked in disbelief, blinking rapidly.

“She didn’t take to any of my medications. There was no way to stop the bleeding.”

“And my child?” Tom said, bracing his hand on the back of a sofa.

Doctor Arnold paused and removed his cap. “I am sorry to say, sorry with all my heart, that your son did not survive either. Despite all my efforts to resuscitate him, your son was dead upon delivery. It was a stillbirth. There was very little I could do. I’m so sorry. So very sorry.”

“It would have been my son?” Tom gasped and nearly collapsed at the news of both his child’s death and the fact it would have been a boy. Buford and Milton held up him around his side to support him from falling.
“Yes sir. I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

“How? How does a child die before it is born?”

Doctor Arnold--highly uncomfortable to be in a room surrounded by so many men who he knew were apt for violence--took three steps backward and said, “Perhaps it is best if some of the more gruesome details were left unsaid.”

“Tell me,” Tom demanded and hunkered down onto his knees, unable to stand under his own power.

“It was due to a nuchal cord.”

“Cut the namby-pamby, doc, and tell him straight,” Milton said.

The doctor paused again, bowed his head, and replied, “Was there ever any physical trauma during your wife’s pregnancy?”

“Come again?” Tom asked.

“What exactly are you implying there?” Chip threatened.

“I’m not implying anything, sir. I am asking. Did she ever have any kind of accident? A fall, perhaps? Did she ever slip out of bed? Even a sudden series of extraneous movements?”

“And what does that have to do with anything?” Milton asked.

“Do you really want to hear this, Mr. Dennison?” Arnold said.

“Yes, goddamn it. Yes. Quit fumbling around and tell me.”

“The reason I mentioned trauma with your wife is because sometime during her pregnancy your son’s umbilical cord was entangled around his neck. Such a thing can occur inside the womb if the mother ever endures—”

Upon hearing the doctor’s report, Milton lunged for him with his fist clenched, sputtering out the words, “You lousy son of a bitch.”
Tom was quick to halt his progress, standing up and grabbing him around his waist. “No, no. No one lays a hand on the doctor. He’s a good man and he did all he could,” he said, walked over to Dr. Arnold at the base of his grand staircase and pressed his hands gently on his cheeks.

He then looked away, staring at the wall, and managed his last words of the night. “I would like it if you boys stayed here tonight and helped with the funeral arrangements. You especially, doc. I will pay you whatever price. But I can’t,” he paused, hardly able to draw a breath. “I can’t do it myself.”

* * *

Long years ago, before the Democrats took back city hall or Tom’s name had ever appeared in a newspaper page, he met his wife while was still sleeping in his office at the back of Madam Anna’s brothel on an old Union Army cot that could fold into its own traveling pack. Every morning he heated his breakfast pan of oatmeal over a can of jellied alcohol. Even in the frigid winter months he showered in a wooden outdoor stall with a bristled horse sponge and a length of rubber hose whose stream came out as weak as spit.

Of his many regular tasks, he doled out Edward Rosewater’s front money solely to smaller welfare causes--a family needing groceries, a farmer wanting to rebuild his barn roof after it was struck by lightning--in return for nothing more than the promise of a vote for their candidate come election day. Never once did he turn away a person in need and never once did he make their requests seem burdensome. Armed with a 10 gauge shotgun, he chaperoned the current mayor--R.C. Cushing, a fellow republican with a number of policies Edward hoped to swing to his liking--to his favorite evening clubs and guarded his door whenever he filled out an
hour with a harlot. More bouncer than boss in that first languid year of operation, Tom kept a looming presence at The Thirteen. On several occasions he took little pleasure in dealing out bodily harm--a broken tibia, a bullet to the foot--to those men who assaulted Madam Wilson’s girls.

Once a trio of jack-rolling bandits from South Dakota spent an evening in Anna’s saloon getting sloshed on rye. When they attempted to gang rape one of the newest working girls in the alley, Tom--without a single word uttered and after a short struggle in the snow--made quick work of binding their hands behind their backs with wire rope. He set them on their knees and quickly dispatched of all three of them one by one with a clean shot to the back of their heads from his Winchester repeater. He then loaded their bodies onto the back of a mule cart, wheeled them down to the Missouri under the cover of nightfall and tossed them off a fishing pier into the water.

The woman, Sue Proust, was scarred to the point that she would never be able to entertain again. They had hacked off a tiny piece of her nose and cut off the top of her ear. Tom immediately offered her a position as his personal secretary, which she gladly accepted. Feeling partially responsible for her disfigurement, in addition to her new salary, he also paid her rent on a nearby apartment to get her out of the underground sleeping rooms. And, once a week, took her to dinner and a show at Boyd’s Opera House.

When Tom arrived to pick her up for one of their outings, he heard music coming from her tenement as he knocked on the door. When she finally answered she was balancing a cello made of laminated willow wood at her side.

“I’m sorry. I’m a little early. I hope I haven’t interrupted anything.”

“I was just practicing. Won’t you please come in?”
“That was lovely music I was hearing,” Tom said as he entered her apartment. “What is that? A viola?”

“It’s a cello. I used to have a bigger one made from maple and ebony that my father bought for me as a young girl, but I lost it in a fire long ago,” she said as Tom took a seat in her kitchen.

“I didn’t know you were a musician. That’s lovely. I wish I had a gift for an instrument.”

“This is a cheap one. See the hide glue on the neck?” She pointed with her bow. “It’s all I could ever afford for myself.”

“Do you need some more money?” he asked.

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean to make it sound like that. You’ve given more than I could ever ask for.”

Tom removed his hat. “Could I hear another song?”

Sue blushed. “We’ll be late. I haven’t gotten ready yet.”

“Let’s stay in, then. Forget the opera. I’d rather hear you play tonight.”

Tom had little experience with musical instruments and after each short song, Sue explained the name of the techniques she’d just used to him. Pizzicato, spiccato, legato double stops. Tom nodded his head like a dim student to feign understanding. Sue sat on a tall box covered in a tablecloth as she drew her bow across the strings. After taking a break from playing, she insisted on making some flapjacks with cornmeal she’d bought at a deli that allowed people to start tabs.

“I’m sorry I don’t have anything fancier to make. I don’t keep a lot of food in the house,” she said as she served Tom a plate of pancakes.
“Flapjacks are lovely. I've always enjoyed breakfast at night,” he said and, after the meal, Sue put their dishes in the sink to soak.

“Would you like to hear another song or two?”

“Nothing would please me more,” he replied and took a seat on her mattress made up with sheets and pillows flattened from years of use. He rolled up his sleeves and loosened his tie as he got comfortable. The music was lulling by nature and within minutes, exhausted from his regular daily grind, Tom was asleep.

When he woke hours later, Sue was curled up next to him, her arm draped over his torso. Both were still fully clothed except for Tom’s shoes, which Sue had taken off and set neatly on a mat by the door. He felt like a thief for dozing off in her bed and taking up her space, but when he stood up and shuffled around the room barefoot on a floor so cold it felt refrigerated, Sue begged him to return to her embrace. Then she muttered something about a dog and a stick of candy. She was in that groggy place halfway between day and dream. Tom slipped on his oxblood Bluchers and left a stack of money on Sue’s nightstand. It was the best sleep he had in years.

A month later after another evening shared—dinner at Harket’s Steakhouse followed by a rendition of the comic opera *Princess Ida*—she asked him if he would like to accompany her back to her room.

“You are a gorgeous woman. So I hope you don’t think I’m declining you because of that,” Tom replied as they approached the sidewalk outside her apartment. She possessed a natural beauty that she hardly ever flaunted ever since leaving the brothel: her ample bosom prudently disclosed under a chemisette, an ankle-length cotton skirt covering her legs to the heel, flaxen blond hair pulled back in a simple knot.
“You’re the kindest man I’ve ever met. Won’t you please let me show you my appreciation?”

Tom touched the brim of his hat. “I am flattered. But the pleasure of your company is more than enough thanks. I would be a lonely man, otherwise.”

“I’m lonely every night. And I don’t want to be tonight. Won’t you please come up?” she said and took Tom by his hand to lead him into her building.

“I’m sorry. But I must say goodnight,” he said, gave her a kiss on the forehead, slid a bill into the doorman’s shirt pocket to ensure she made it up to her room safely, and departed back towards his office.

The following week, while he was seated at his desk reviewing the day’s carbon paper tabs from the policy game betting slips, Sue entered Tom’s office without an appointment. Not saying a word, she began to disrobe right in front of him. She slowly unbuttoned the front of her princess line walking dress, sliding it off to the ground to reveal the drapery of her bustle. She unclipped her hair and let it fall onto her shoulders. Tom removed his glasses as she took off her satin camisole and knee-length underwear until she was completely nude. She continued to stand exposed, her breasts heaving with her panicked breaths. Tom rose from his chair and attempted to cover her with his Norfolk jacket.

She shrugged it off and put her arms around him.

“You must be freezing,” he said and reached again for the jacket on the ground.

“Warm me up,” she replied and kissed him on the mouth, her hands cradling the back of his head.

Tom, not expecting her forwardness, broke away from her embrace.
“I’m a fool,” she said and buried her face in her hands. “You think I am ugly because of what those men did to me. Because I used to work for Anna.”

“You’re not a fool. And you’re certainly not ugly. You are the best looking gal in the whole city,” Tom said and put his hands on her back.

Sue faced him. “You won’t take me out ever again. I know it.”

“How’s tomorrow night sound?”

“Don’t lie to me,” she muttered.

“I’m not lying,” he said and took her hands in his. “But what kind of gentleman would I be if I took advantage of you?”

“You’re not, I’m taking advantage of you,” Sue said, kissed him again, and they fell to the ground amongst the litter of discarded policy game tickets.

The next morning at sunrise they rose in bed together and decided to take a sack of hardened bread crumbs to feed the pigeons together in Hanscom Park, a ritual that Tom would come to carry out for the rest of his life.

* * *

So came the days of mourning, days of reclusion. Following the funeral for Sue and his unborn son, and after his daughter Francis returned to Lincoln to finish her second semester of study, Tom took a ten-day train trip to San Diego without company. Billy Nesselhous, ever the faithful majordomo, filled Tom’s seat at the democratic headquarters during his absence, keeping the books cooked and appointments regular. Upon Tom’s return, after a week of residing in bungalow four at the Palace Hotel by the dusty-green sea where he spent his days shopping for
antique lamps and hunting for butterflies, he boarded himself up inside his Gold Coast home, refusing all visitors.

First came days without shaving, then weeks, until a full but uneven beard of white-gray wires filled out his cheeks. He hired a live-in servant, Noah Keller, a tiny sprite of a man who Tom required to wear white waiter’s gloves and a yachting jacket at all times. His daily tasks including everything from grocery shopping to burning Tom’s entire wardrobe in the family fireplace. In place of his tailored suits that had been sent up as smoke through the chimney, Tom wore only white sport shirts and brown slacks Noah purchased for him in bulk (twenty pairs of each) at the Brandeis department store. In addition to errand-running, Noah also prepared all of Tom’s meals—a menu of which grew stranger and more epicurean by the day: yak milk with ice in an aluminum cup, cold lamb sandwiches with peanut butter, boiled quail eggs washed down with peach soda, fresh octopus shipped in from Hawaii, white chocolate bars, liver soup, pumpernickel bread fried in fatback, raisin pie. For a whole week, Tom ate only rice and dried bananas, his face gaunt, sunk of all color. Constipation followed, hours sitting on a chilly toilet in the dark.

In the formal dining room, he had a furniture truck haul away his twelve-chair table to make space for an indoor firing range, a total length of twenty-five feet from end to end. Once hallowed out, Tom set up makeshift targets along the far wall and, at the other end, a white leather chair next to a gun rack. From that seat, donning a safari hat with a neck string, he spent large hours of the day blasting grapeshot and two-inch cartridges into old pieces of furniture: couches, bedsteads, bookcases and even car doors delivered to his house from a scrap yard until they were peppered with slugs, trucked away again, and replaced with new pieces. As days
progressed, he sometimes spent more than eight hours at a time in that white leather armchair, gun in his lap, loose shell casings and bullets scattered at his feet next to a brass spittoon.

Naked, he played chess against himself, rotating the board around with each move. Never once did he open a newspaper—Omaha could’ve seceded from the Union or the Great War could’ve ended and he wouldn’t have known it. Instead, he read books on myriad odd subjects: animal husbandry, European etiquette, shamanism, Ottoman artillery. Baths became as irregular as sleep, taking them up only when he could no longer stand his own smell or keep his eyes open.

Finally, after six weeks of such behavior, a tingle on his bedroom phone woke Tom from a deep sleep in the middle of the night. He answered the call quickly, muttered back only a few hushed responses, left the house for the first time in over a month without waking his servant, climbed into his Columbia, and drove himself to the club through a snowstorm that had already covered the city in six inches of powder. The man who’d called was police chief Pszanwoski and he was standing on the sidewalk when Tom pulled up to the curb in front of his largest brothel, The Berryman Club.

He paused before stepping inside, snow collecting on his beard and the velvet collar of his Shetland overcoat. He looked to the police chief who simply shook his head but said nothing, flicked his cigarette into the street, and opened the heavy walnut door which bled out a stream of light and music into the quiet of the swirling snow.

Even for a weekday night in the middle of a blizzard, the ratio of men to women was extremely high. Usually fifteen or more women circulated the parlor hoping to entice a client upstairs, but tonight only a handful were available. Despite the lack of working girls on the main floor, the club was operating as if it was just another usual night of debauchery and decadence.
while the hands of the clock moved through the early morning hours. Tom walked across the
parlor, ordered a Vichy water at the bar, turned to Pszanowski and asked, “How many?”

“Twelve,” the police chief replied.

Tom cringed at the number and glanced to the main staircase that led up to the cribs. It
was currently being guarded by two uniformed police. “All at the same time?”

“From what we can gather. Doc Arnold’s up there now.”

Tom went to the bottom of the staircase, told the two officers to split, and, as he climbed
the steps with Pszanowski trailing him, asked, “Are you ill, old tap?”

“How’s that?”

“Keeping your uniforms in plain sight,” Tom replied without looking back, referring to
the two officers who were now exiting the brothel. “You think that might impugn on business?”

“I didn’t want nobody coming up here, considering.”

“What do I pay my doormen for?”

“You’re right, Tom. I’m sorry,” the chief said as they both came to the top of the stairs
where a long hallway was lit by gas lamps. Lining both sides of the hall was a row of harlots
who should’ve been down working the parlor but instead were chatting softly with one another,
some of them holding back tears, and many only half-dressed in lace drawers, silk stockings and
flannelette night robes. Immediately Tom was greeted by The Berryman’s longtime madam,
Louise Vinciquerra, as he swiped snow off the crown of his Dunlap hat with a flick of his hand.

“Louise, so sorry to hear. I got here as quickly as I could. How are the girls holding up?”

“Not well. The ones who seen it, they’re threatening to call the police,” she said.

“The police are here,” Tom said and pointed at Psznawoski.

“Yes, but real police.”
Tom looked about the hallway. Every single harlot--nearly twenty of them--stared at him in a hushed reverence, their faces ghostly with makeup, embroidered handkerchiefs balled up in their gloved hands. “The chief of police is real police, Madam,” Tom said and cleared his throat. “I’d like to speak with Doctor Arnold for a few ticks.”

“This way,” Madam Louise said as she led Tom and the police chief into the first of the boudoirs. Each bore its own theme by color or design--the gold room, the cherry room, the mirror room, the Oriental room. Upon entering the blue room, Tom first witnessed the disaster that had sprung him from bed in the middle of the night: three dead prostitutes. One was splayed out naked and facedown on the sleigh bed. The second was slumped over on a silk divan, dressed only in a pair of Muslin underwear. The third was in the bathtub which was half full of pink water, stained by her own blood.

Tom shuddered as he looked over each body. None of the three girls were older than twenty. Kneeling on the tile in front of the tub was Doctor Arnold, his stethoscope hanging down his shirtfront like a necktie. Holding his hat in his hand, Tom stared at the dead girl in the tub for longer than a minute.

She’d slit her wrists with a pearl pocket knife. The blade, left untouched by the doctor so as not to disturb the scene, floated in the marbling water like a shiny toy. One of her arms dangled over the side of the tub. Someone had closed her eyelids for her. Her hair was the color of honey and the rest of her hair--under her arms and between her legs--was shaven clean, as if she’d still been planning on entertaining that very night before slicing herself open. Doctor Arnold looked up at Tom but said nothing. All he could do was shake his head in disgust.

Tom crouched down and dipped a finger into the bath. “The water’s still warm.”

“Couldn’t have happened more than half an hour ago,” Arnold replied.
Tom patted him on the shoulder and told him to get off his knees. “What about the other two? What happened to them?” he asked.

“Drank a couple mugs of chloroform,” Arnold said as he stepped back out in the bedroom and picked up one of the contaminated beer glasses off the dresser. “Enough to kill three men.”

“Death just follows you everywhere these days,” Tom said to the doctor, the first time they’d spoken since the funeral.

“Of course it does,” Arnold said. “If I only dealt with life and health, I wouldn’t have much of a practice.”

“Some sad gig,” Tom said as he was taken into other rooms and shown nine more bodies. A total of twelve girls had committed suicide that night. Nearly all of them did so by drinking carbolic acid—a substance with an aroma and taste like scotch whiskey but toxic enough to cause second degree burns or, if guzzled as a solution, as it was by the whores, could stop a person’s heart in less than thirty minutes.

The Paradise Room held six of the corpses. Three of them were slumped over each other in the gigantic oval bed as if they’d each slugged down the drams of poison together with their backs against the headboard in one last communal toast. Signs of their final activities were still strewn about the room, untouched: a douche apparatus with a skinny rubber hose and a five quart tank rested on a bedside table, cocaine sweepings were scattered on a handheld mirror next to flutes of champagne that still retained their effervescence and were marked with bowties of lipstick on their brims, a half-eaten dinner plate of salted sowbelly, fancy wax beans, and baked jellied grapes was tossed on the carpet, a base burner in the corner of the room was heating coal, and coat stand was hung with broad-brimmed hats as if the girls had been picking out which
piece of millinery to don for the night—all signs that their decision to end their lives was an impulsive one, or at least rash enough to raise suspicions.

“This is some blunder,” Tom said and could not stop shaking his head. The ragged melodies pounded out by the pianist professor were still ringing downstairs, audible through the floorboards. He turned to Doctor Arnold. “Just how could these girls get their mitts on this junk? A prescription from you, perhaps?”

“Absolutely not. They could’ve bought it at any drugstore. It’s not illegal.”

Tom wiped his forehead. “Well, Louise, how do you want to handle this?”

“What did I have them call you for? Just get them out of here without making a fuss. I don’t want these bodies in here a minute longer, it’s ruining my night’s business,” the madam replied.

“No nonsense with you.”

“These girls are your slaves,” Louise said, her face inches away from Tom’s. “They take five tricks to earn fifty dollars in one night and have to pay half of it to you. So what do you really think?”

“What I really think?” Tom said, running his tongue along the inside of his bottom lip. “I think you got a screw loose somewheres. These dames make more than any other women in the city. And more than most men. If they want to go be housewives or work in a sweatshop, all they got to do is let me know. Let you know. Christ, they pull more scratch than Walter here and he’s the chief of police. But you don’t see him drinking down the benzene, do you? Lord knows he’s got enough reason to do it.”

“So many I can’t keep count,” the chief replied.
Tom ignored his quip. “This is your problem, madam. You need to get your house in order, quick.”

After a moment, Tom went back out into the hallway and told his remaining working girls to gather up all their belongings. “ Anything you want to keep, get it now,” he said. “Hidden cash, jewelry, diaries, anything. Whatever you leave behind will be gone for good if you don’t take it with you.”

As the women scurried off to collect their possessions, Tom instructed Madam Louise to clear out the customers downstairs. “You and your girls can stay at The Paxton for the rest of the week. After that, we’ll see about getting you set up in a new place.”

“A new place? Why? This is the finest house in the city.”

“Not anymore it’s not,” Tom replied and told both Chief Psznavoski and Doctor Arnold to stay upstairs with him until everyone else had left the building. Within fifteen minutes the remaining prostitutes, customers, bouncers, bartenders, cocktail waitresses and the pianist professor had filed out through the front doors. Madam Louise and her girls all called for their driver services to take them to the Paxton Hotel. Psznavoski suggested he call his men to help remove the bodies, but Tom told him not to bother. They walked from room to room, covering all four floors, searching the closets and the bathrooms to make sure the entire building was vacant save for the twelve corpses.

When the three man came back downstairs to the main parlor, Tom took two bottles of gin and began to pour them out over the bar counter. Both Arnold and Psznavoski watched him for a moment and, as Tom was soaking the carpets and divans with four more bottles, the chief, finally understanding what Tom was doing, said, “There’s other ways to handle this.”
“Not without risk,” Tom said and emptied a jug of corn whiskey over the gold piano. After a few minutes, he’d doused most of the furniture and curtains.

“This is really a shame,” the chief said as they headed towards the front door. The price of the furniture alone was more than quadruple his yearly salary.

“You’re telling me,” Tom replied and turned to Doctor Arnold. “Unless you have some potion that can bring twelve dead whores back to life?”

As the doctor shook his head, Tom struck a match against the door frame and tossed it onto a soaked patch of carpet. Flames erupted immediately and spread throughout the lobby in one swelling belch. Tom stood in the doorway for a moment and watched the flames conflagrate across the parlor. It crawled up the walls, charring the paneling. Paisley-patterned couches roasted until their cushioned seats gave out. Flames rolled across the bar counter as quickly as a spilled drink. With a shake of his head, Tom finally turned and joined the doctor and police chief out in the center of Douglas Street. The fire was now engulfing the second and third floors, moving with the speed of a sneeze, bursting out of the wide-paneled windows. The sky was written with a dull yellow smoke. Charred bits of ashen paper, wallpaper scraps, and seared wood fell with the whispery snowfall where it singed out on the frozen ground.

“Wait three more minutes, then call the fire department,” was all Tom said to Psznawoski as he opened the door of his Columbia, but the chime of a fire engine bell was already audible in the distance and The Berryman, burning at a full roar, would never entertain another customer.

Moments after the Columbia disappeared, the dull red tail lamps rounding a curve, Psznawoski pulled his jacket collar over his mouth to keep from inhaling the smoke, turned to the doctor and said, “He’s gone mad, hasn’t he?”
“Gone?” Arnold scoffed and shook his head. “It isn’t a recent development, I assure you. Man’s always had bats in his belfry. The only difference is that now he’s letting them fly.”

* * *

In the week that followed the fire, Tom slowly began to reemerge from his house to once again take up the affairs of the city. He shaved off his beard, bought ten new suits, three new hats, and resumed his regular hours on the top floor of the Dodge Hotel. Once again he was seen touring the streets in the back of his eight-cylinder French jobs with Harry Buford at the wheel. And, on the morning of November 11, 1918, the business of eggshell politics led him to the Balbo Brothers Barbershop, where the newly-elected reform mayor Parsons Smith took his morning shave.

Frost fogged the double windows that were painted with advertisements for dentistry and licorice root as Tom entered the shop, a brass bell chiming above the door. He wiped his feet on the welcome rug and tipped back his hat. Mayor Smith was reclined in a hydraulic chair, a long cloth gown draped over his shoulders and lap, his face lathered in shaving soap.

The barber, carefully slicing foam from the mayor’s left cheek, stepped away from the chair and dropped the straight razor into a mug. Sheared blond hair from a previous cutting littered the cracked tile floor like clumps of pine needles. Tom handed the barber a folded bill and asked for a few minutes of privacy. The Hoffmann brothers stood guard at the door, arms folded, toothpicks waggling. The barber nodded and retreated into the back of the parlor through a burlap-encurtained doorway.
“Morning, Mayor,” Tom said and took a seat on the green leather chair next to him. His lower lip was socked with a wad of tobacco the size of a walnut and he carried an old pineapple can to collect his spit. He spun around to face the mayor, removed his bowler, and rested it on the tip of his shoe after crossing his leg over his knee. “How’s life in the public sector treating you?”

The mayor draped a hot towel over his shoulders and turned his eyes upward at the yellow tin ceiling. “Be a whole lot better if I didn’t have deal with hooligans like you coming at me every other day wanting this and wanting that.”

Tom hawked a string of brown juice into his old can. “I don’t want a thing from you. I came here to offer something.”

Smith removed the paper collar tucked into his long bib and tossed it on the counter in front of him where an assortment of cosmetics rested along the sill: a pink bottle of Witch Hazel, hair scissors submerged in the blue sterilizing water of a Barbicide jar, a cake of lilac soap in a pearly dish, a horsehair brush resting in a ceramic bowl. “I’m not sitting around for this,” he said.

“What’s the matter? In no mood for chitchat? We’re in a barbershop, after all.”

“If it’s official business you’re after, I’d ask you make an appointment with my office instead of harassing me even before I’ve had my breakfast.”

Tom leaned back in his chair, lounging it to a full tilt, flipped open the cover of his timepiece, noted the hour, and dropped it back into his vest pocket as he eyed the mayor from his shoe tops to his hair part.

Parsons Smith--a short-framed man with gold-flecked eyes, bulldog jowls, and a middle part in his lampblack hair--was Omaha’s first mayor to wrangle city hall away from James Dahlman in four terms and referred to himself not as the leader of the city, but as a public
servant. On the surface he lived a life without decadence, attending First Presbyterian Church with his wife and three sons every Sunday, riding on public transportation instead of using an official car, and spending most of his administrative efforts furthering his crusade for moral purity, which, simply, meant nothing more than the strict enforcement of prohibition laws. Beneath that veil, he was one of the wealthiest men in the city. He’d married into his money, wedding the daughter of a tycoon who owned four paper mills.

“Well now,” Tom said after a long moment. “I didn’t want to barge in on your leisure time, but you’re a hard man to see. I’ve tried making appointments, but somehow or another your schedule is always booked. Way back when, whenever I needed to find the mayor, I could just drop on by and he was usually in his office.”

“In your back pocket, more like it.” Smith snorted. “And that’s just the reason I haven’t taken a meeting with you. You’re hoping to nab yourself an employee and I already have a job.”

“That you do,” Tom replied, his jaw muscles tightening. “And a fine job you’re doing. You and your moderate progressives. Five months on the job and already the lowest approval rating since Andrew Poppleton, way back before either one of us was in diapers. And he resigned after six months. I ain’t so sharp at math, but I do know for a certainty that six months isn’t that much longer than five.”

Smith shook his head. “I didn’t take this job to make friends. Or gain popularity. I took it up because this city’s got to have a man that makes the decisions that it needs, not what it wants. And I aim to keep making ‘em even if they don’t like it. Or me.”

“Oh, nuts,” Tom laughed. “I ain’t selling Cottolene door-to-door.”

“But you are selling something. And whatever it is, I’m not buying.”
Tom dug the grassy chaw out of his bottom lip, flung it into his fruit can, and wiped off his mouth with the back of his hand. “Yeah? Well you ought to give it a listen before you decide that.”

“I don’t need you. I got to where I’m at now because I promised the good people of this city I wouldn’t make deals with characters like you.”

“The good people of this city,” Tom repeated the words curiously, as if chewing them down to a mash. “Yeah, you got the good people, alright. You got the Omaha Church Federation, the temperance babes, the Douglas County Dry League. You even got them old stock whites. Oh yes, you got them all and you can keep ‘em. But forget about the better elements for a second.”

The mayor scoffed. “Why should I?”

“Because you don’t need what you already have.”

“You’re slipping me a baited hook,” Smith said with a dismissive wave of his hand and twirled around his chair to look at the back of the shop where his barber had disappeared behind the thick maroon curtain.

“The only thing I’m extending to you is an olive branch.”

“But only the dumb fish gets the metal in his mouth,” Smith said quickly, his words coming out almost on top of Tom’s.

“And only a mayor willing to get a little dirt on his hands gets to keep it off his streets.”

“I ain’t going to make a deal with you, not of any kind. I don’t know how much cleaner I can say it. So if you’d be so kind, I’d like to get back to my shave.”

Tom dumped the contents of his tobacco can down an ironstone sink next to his chair and turned on the tiny spigot to wash it down the drain. “Let me cut to the paste. Politics don’t concern me. You can have this city and have it whistle clean.”
“And it’d been clean the day you left it.”

Tom smirked and continued his sale without skipping a beat. “We got us a vote on the Women’s Detention Hospital coming up next week and it’d be prudent of you, you all about prudence ain’t ya? It’d be prudent to—”

The mayor cut in with an explosive tenor. “Ain’t no way I’m budging on that. I don’t want this city advertised as a place where diseased prostitutes can be cured.”

“You’d rather have it be a place where they can spread their infections faster than a common cold on a restaurant fork ain’t been through the wash? Either way, this city’s gonna have its whores. Might as well be clean ones. Can’t have a clean city without clean whores.”

“We can’t have a clean city with any whores.”

“Are you a politician or a pastor, Mr. Mayor?” Tom said and reached out to spin Smith’s chair around to look him in the eye. “You can’t be both. So tell me, just where you think you gonna stash all them dames? Where you gonna chase them off to? Iowa? Tibet? So long as there’s beds in bedrooms there’s gonna be whores in whorehouses. Or in the alleys. But me, I keep ’em out of the alleys. I keep ’em in those beds where the only people who see ’em are those that pay to see ’em. Otherwise it’s back to peddling cooch in the street and flashing thighs in apartment doorways for lil’ Jimmy and Auntie Margret to witness on their way to chapel. Be it a kitchen floor or a city block, cleanliness is judged by the eyes. And I’m the only fella in this whole damn city that can keep up its appearance.”

The mayor replied, “The moral decline in this city is one of our most pressing issues and you want me to sweep the dirt under the rug just so folks can’t see it when they walk by? Well, that just isn’t the way I use my broom.”
Tom pushed aside the bottles and canisters on the sill in front of the mayor and sat on the narrow counter with his back against the mirror. “Don’t you know what a mayor does? People want you to fix potholes, not their souls. You can’t save Omaha from sin any more than you can teach a dog the alphabet.”

Smith slanted his gold-flecked eyes up at Tom. “I know exactly what my duties are. My role is to sit on the lid of expenditures.” He paused. “And to bottle up crime.”

“All you want to do is catch bootleggers and expedite whores over the river.”

“Speaking of liquor, that well is about to dry up on you, quick.”

Tom shrugged. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that. Too many bathtubs in this city to get rid of all the gin, and half of them ain’t mine. But I could give you that half.”

“And get rid of your competition,” the mayor said.

“And get rid of half the liquor in this city. Now, that’s more than you’ll ever be able to chase down otherwise.”

“In return for what? Protection? No, I won’t bite at that.”

Tom picked his hat off his chair and smashed it on his head. “The only noble creature on of all God’s green earth is the noble fool.”

The mayor laughed. “I knew you were a cynic. I didn’t know you were a loon.”

“Well, I’ll leave the judgments to you. But if it’s come to what you know or what you don’t, I’ll tell you one something I’ve come to understand over the years,” Tom said and stood, making ready to leave. “If you hold people up to their own light long enough, eventually they’ll draw the shade for everybody.”

“Meaning what?”
“Maybe nothing. Or maybe you don’t want to find out,” Tom said as he lumbered over to the front door. Milton opened it for him, the bell chiming again, and Tom stopped before exiting. “You always been a good Presbyterian boy, Mr. Mayor? Hmm? You ever get arrested for public drunkenness as teenager? Ever fuck any of your colored housemaids? Your wife ever have an abortion? I for one would certainly hope that the man who plans to the cleanse this city of all its filth doesn’t have any under his own fingernails.”

The mayor stood from his chair calmly. “Are you finding it difficult to get what you want when you can’t buy it or bully it into submission?”

Tom smiled and took off his fedora to examine the satin lining as if his response was stitched into the fabric. Placing it back on his head, he said, “Difficult? Hell, Mr. Mayor, you’re making it easy for me,” and exited the barbershop.

Sliding into the backseat of his idling Panhard, he slapped Buford playfully on the shoulder and they roared off down the glimmering wet avenue as the gray of dawn pinked with first light. While the streets were empty at that hour, it was a Monday morning that would be overrun with mobbed celebration past breakfast, for the first world war had officially come to an end with the signing of the armistice in Paris. As Omaha awakened to the news, people took the streets in bathrobes and nightgowns, banging pots and pans, crying out: Peace is here! At long last, peace is here! By noon, almost every school and downtown business had closed for the day. A holiday-like fervor followed. Small flags were flown out of car windows. Citizens of every stripe—coppersmiths, cabinet makers, housewives, lathe hands, women in coveralls, overnight cooks still in aprons and caps—joined in song and delight that the Kaiser and the Heir had finally been defeated.
Tiny scraps of torn paper rained down from ten-story windows, rooftops, and theatre balconies like confetti. Toilet paper rolls and ticker tape tailed out of high windows, rolling through the air like party streamers. The leafy snow fluttered over the downtown sidewalks, settling on car hoods and hay wagons, hats and hair, general stores and smoke shops until the streets were carpeted with paper. People rode the fenders of streetcars, waving their hats in delight. Couples and complete strangers kissed in front of snapping cameras. A man played a violin, another squeezed an accordion, troops of boy scouts blew their bugles and pounded their drums--the sounds of their instruments drowned out by cheers and backfiring automobiles.

To those in the midst of all the tin-pan clangor and joyous flag waving, it was unimaginable that less than a year later, on those very same streets, the sound of marching feet, falling scraps of paper, and frenzied mobs now celebrating the end of one kind of destruction would signal the arrival of another evil entirely of their own making. For on that day in middle November, Omaha had banded together in harmonious rapture like every other allied metropolis the world over. Ten months later, it would become a city torn and burnt from within.
From the day it was first established--July 4, 1854--Omaha had always been a violent town. Long before Dennison ever stepped foot in the city, bloodshed between European settlers and Native American tribes such as the Otes and Poncas was as commonplace as nightly supper. The first grave ever dug in town--on the corner of what would become 10th and Harney--was for the butchered remains of an Ote squaw left on the roadside in a potato sack. Three years after Omaha City officially earned its name, Pawnees invaded forts and scalped entire families over matters as trivial as payment for deer killed by the whites. In retaliation, wigwam shops were looted and sent ablaze, the burnt corpses of tribal children shoveled into the backs of carts with the rest of the charred debris.

Closer to Tom’s arrival, as the Indian Wars neared their end, murder was even more rampant. In 1891, two killings in particular drew national attention. A private in the Salvation Army--Nettie Birdler--shot Captain Haddie Smith in the heart in front of more than three thousand attendees of an international exposition for the army’s troops. She then turned the pistol on herself, stumbled around for a moment with blood leaking from her mouth and nostrils as the bullet passed behind her eyes and fell off the stage into a gutter. A month earlier an even more publicized murder took place. George Smith, a black railroad kayducer accused of raping a fourteen-year-old white girl, was lynched by a mob led by the police chief and a city councilman. His body was drug through the center of town by a pair of horses with his neck in a noose and was hung from a streetcar wire in front of crowd that numbered more than ten-thousand. Both stories were page three print in the New York Times.
During the first years of Tom’s life in the city, the violence continued to grow. In November of 1895, three men—a collar maker, a coal hauler and a machinist—abducted an eleven-year-old girl from the front stoop of her home. They forced her into an abandoned fabric warehouse not more than two blocks from where her widowed mother was cooking dinner inside their one-bedroom flat and, after taking turns raping her, beat her to death with their fists.

A year later, an Omaha police officer killed a black singer, J.T. Washington, by stabbing him in the base of his skull with a stiletto after witnessing him kissing his wife outside a pool hall. In certain areas of town—particularly Squatters’ Row and Vinegar Flats—knife fights were so common that even when a man survived nine stab wounds, as was the case with Ira Longman, the news was little more than a paragraph blurb on the back pages of *The Bee* or *The Republican*.

Of all the crimes committed in Omaha’s past and even its future—even if one could see all the way down the line to the rapture and the end of all things—very few, if any, could or would compare to the violence in the summer of 1919.

World War I ended the previous November, the military demobilized, and veterans were shipped back home on creaking dreadnoughts with the ends of their green ties tucked in between the second and third buttons of their brown dress tunics. They returned home to weeping mothers and painted-faced sweethearts only to find that many of their jobs were no longer available. Blacks and whites alike were competing for the even the most meager employment: quarter-an-hour salaries at the steel mill, stocking shelves at corner groceries, mopping up wastewater in the stockyards.

In that long, swelling summer, electric fans oscillated on every window sill but did little work in breaking up the velvety humidity. Whole families cramped into clapboard tenements where bathtubs were in the kitchens and closets were bedrooms. Not even a thunderstorm could
cool the radiating pavement. It was the summer of the boll weevil chewing through cotton crops in the south faster than a brush fire, maize-colored organdie dresses, pink ice cream cones, the first night-flight plane trips by the postal service, dry rivers and even drier air. Once, it was reported in *The Daily Herald*, a lightning bolt shot down a chimney in a North Omaha residence and set a straw broom ablaze, but nothing else.

That August, the little precipitation that had fallen gave birth to hordes of mosquitoes who put infants and the elderly into hospitals. For every tin can filled with rain water or every stagnant alley puddle that never received sunlight, it seemed another thousand mosquitoes hatched from their aquatic eggs, leaving families to burn sulfur candles on top of their cold radiators, drape cheese cloth over their beds, and perform their morning toilet in the dark. Rats and mice also multiplied in vast numbers that summer, poisoned by electric paste set out in dishes under kitchen sinks and arsenic pellets left in bowls behind floor-length curtains. To get a drink, a man was forced underground to iron door speakeasies where it was hotter still, paid three times the price for needle beer or a shot of pulpskull, and sat sweating through the seats of their pants, awaiting another sizzling dawn like a death sentence.

And death did come.

It came on the end of a hangman’s knot. It came from fire hoses used to break up a mob. It came written on notes falling from a burning roof. It came begging for life out of the smoking Douglas County Courthouse doors. It came dangling from a trolley pole. It came on a lynching pyre soaked in kerosene from fire truck lanterns. It came tied to the bumper of an Oldsmobile. It came from false newspaper accounts. It came from false charges of rape. It came from race. It came from politics. It came to five Omaha police officers. It came to an innocent man. And it nearly came to mayor Parsons Smith.
But, most of all, it came on orders from Tom Dennison.

Racial tensions were peaking in cities of all sizes. From the wharves of New York to the goldfields of California, more than thirty riots erupted that summer--in Charleston and Baltimore, Knoxville and Chicago, Bloomington and Philadelphia, and, finally, in the second to last and perhaps most violent outbreak of all, during the final week of September, death came to Omaha.

But first--two days before that ominous autumn evening--Dr. Broomfield and his nephew, Will Brown, came to Tom’s Dodge Hotel office.

They burst through his door without an appointment at eight in the morning, walking right past the Hoffmann brothers who were sitting guard in the hall but asleep in their chairs with their homburgs tilted over their faces, newspapers draped over their laps, and their .32s sticking out of the sides of their jacket holsters.

Tom was lounging back in a wicker rocker, scratching oleomargarine on a stack of hot wheat cakes, his shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow, vest unbuttoned. A bottle of vegetable tonic for indigestion was uncorked on his desk. Broomfield held his nephew at the elbow as he drug him into the office like a child awaiting punishment although Will Brown was forty years old and three inches taller than his doctor uncle.

Brown--the son of Broomfield’s sister--was a packinghouse worker at the Union Stockyards. He suffered from acute rheumatism and could not spell his own name. He wore a black cloth hat with a curled brim, his clothes reeked of stove smoke, and spittle glistened on his lips as he held back his tears with tiny nasal breaths.

Tom immediately sized him up as the darkest slice of milquetoast he’d ever laid eyes on. As soon as the two men shuffled across the carpet, Tom swung his feet off his desk and locked
eyes with Broomfield who halted in the middle of the room decorated with rosewood furniture, silk floss pillows, ruffled curtains, and a gigantic Turkish hearthrug.

“Here he is!” Broomfield said and gave his nephew a quick shove towards Tom’s desk. “Here is the boy you wanted to sacrifice to get back your precious city.”

Tom lowered his spectacles down to the tip of his nose. “Well, hello and good morning to you, too, Kitten. Thanks for letting me know you’d be stopping by so early.”

“I wanted to get to the lion waking in his own den.”

“What’s the hubbub this time? Find another dagger on your car seat?”

“I’m in no mood for your pantry aisle banter,” Broomfield said as his nephew let out another whimper. Tears were dripping off his chin and his hands were shaking.

Tom turned to the sobbing man standing before his desk and offered him his clean breakfast napkin to wipe his face. “Who’s this soggy one, now?”

“Don’t you play ignorant with me,” Broomfield said.

“I ain’t,” Tom said and knocked an inch of ash off his cigarette. “I ain’t just but seen him now as you brought him past my doorsill.”

“You didn’t need to see him to finger him for a crime that never happened in today’s Bee. All you needed to know was his name and that he was of my stock.”

“Your stock?” Tom took a slug of his vegetable tonic straight from the bottle. It slid down his gullet like cold syrup and he cringed at its taste. “He a relation?”

“He’s my sister’s son. But that isn’t the issue. You know damn well what I mean and it’s got nothing to do with family.”

“What do you mean, then?”

Broomfield pointed to his nephew’s face. “That ain’t burnt cork on his cheek.”
“Now listen here,” Tom began with a much more serious tone, for he knew exactly what the doctor was referring to--the fact that he’d had his men painting themselves up in blackface and committing crimes all across the city under the guise that they were negroes. Over the course of the previous month, more than twelve separate accounts of rape perpetrated by black men on white women had been reported in the papers. All but three of them had been outright fictions.

Crime was spiking in every corner of the city, and not just of the racial or sexual variety. Two daylight bank robberies had spilled out onto the streets and sent bullets shaving across the avenues and dinging off street signs in the middle of the lunch hour for folks to witness in the middle of their butter sandwiches. Car hijackings were even more frequent, the autos found hours later on the side of the road next to a pig farm or on a residential street after the gas tank went dry. Drunken shootouts occurred almost every evening and, even when they didn’t, there were still reports in the papers. Dead bodies were found in cinder alleys by children roller-skating between buildings. Others were fished out of Carter Lake, some of them months old and the skin as hard as weatherboarding.

The outbreak of crime wasn’t new. The publicity was.

Tom didn’t need to stir up more violence in the pot, he only needed to take off the lid so the whole town could finally see the smoke. William Brown was simply the newest plume and the man who Tom wagged his finger at as he said to Dr. Broomfield, “You listen here and you listen good, I ain’t seen this boy before in all my born days and I ain’t seen today’s paper neither.”

“Well, here it is, right here,” Broomfield said and plopped down the morning edition of The Omaha Bee on Tom’s desk after taking it out of his interior coat pocket. But Tom had
already seen it. He’d seen the headline that read, “Black Beast Sticks Up Couple”, and he’d read every line below it, lines of which reported:

_The most daring attack on a white woman ever perpetrated in Omaha, the most recent act in a series of violent offenses conducted by the Negro on Caucasian females in the city, occurred one block south of Bancroft Street near Scenic Avenue in Gibson two nights ago. Pretty little Agnes Loebeck was assaulted by a negro she identified as William Brown while returning home in company with Millard Hoffmann, her fiancée, a cripple and decorated war veteran._

Tom glanced at the folded paper and turned his attention to his window. The final bright September morning of the decade was pouring sunlight through the slats. “You know something, Jack, ever since you got yourself out of office you’ve been back worrying yourself too much over slot machine pennies and newspaper sentiments which is the same thing you were doing when I first came to know you. Now, some might say that’s a kind of regression. And this kind of thing is below you.”

Broomfield stepped forward and put his knuckles to Tom’s desk. His nephew was still whimpering in the middle of the carpet. “Below me? You’ve just put lease on my sister’s son life. You, sir, have accused him of raping a nineteen-year-old white girl,” he said and pounded the newspaper with the flat of his hand.

“Well, if that’s the case, this sounds like a negro problem. And keeping your fellow nigras in check is your responsibility, not mine.”

“It’s you!” Broomfield shouted. “You are the wedge! You want a race war on your hands? You’re about to have one. You want ten-thousand coloresd up in arms just so you can create a little havoc?”
“It’s not me, Doc. This kind of thing is happening everywhere. Ask President Wilson how much he cares. It’s going on all over the country and the federal government has done nothing to stop it.”

“But this ain’t everywhere. This is Omaha and you control everything in Omaha.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear, but we lost Omaha last September. The moral boys are in charge now and you can see what a fine job they’re doing.”

“Just like you hoped,” Broomfield cut in sharply. “You’d rather see this city tear itself apart before you let Smith have any success. You once told me you care about this city, but you ain’t give a lick about it unless it’s your city.”

“That’s right. And it will be ours again if you could see it more plainly.”

“That’s the rationale of a child. My nine-year-old daughter’s got more moral fiber than you. You might not have city hall, but you got your paper,” Broomfield replied and slapped the copy of the Bee on Tom’s desk again. “You want to discredit our new reform government? Fine. But there are better ways to do it.”

Tom smiled and stood from his desk. He stretched and yawned. “There are some things I don’t think you’ll ever understand and this is one of them.”

“I understand plenty. I understand that you think the only genius in this world is connivance.”

“Sometimes to keep the throne a man has got to use the lash,” Tom replied and shuffled to the rear of his office where he opened a vinyl accordion folding door to an adjacent sitting room. “But if you’re still pondering the grand scheme of things, let me relieve you of the mystery,” he said and invited Broomfield and his nephew inside.
As they entered, they saw five people sitting in a circle of club chairs and a stuffed parlor couch: Milton Hoffmann and his son Millard, Agnes Loebeck, officers Harry Buford and Joe Potach—both in full police uniform. The entire consortium who’d accused William of rape were not only healthy and without scar or injury, but smiling and well-dressed. It took a moment for their presence to register on Broomfield’s face but, when it did, his expression washed over and every muscle from his jawbone to his temple tightened. A ribbon of sweat streaked down his cheek. His nephew began to sob even harder. For nearly the entirety of a minute, nobody in the room besides the whimpering William Brown made a sound.

Tom stood there with his hands dug into his pockets, waiting for an eruption. Both Officers Buford and Potach were standing behind the couch, balancing coffee cups on saucers. Finally Millard Hoffmann stood from his chair, hefting himself up on his wooden crutch, pulled out a cigarette that was tucked behind his ear like an accountant’s pencil, and lit it with the pop of a match.

Broomfield continued to stare at the gathering without making a single movement, his hands at his sides, his face twisted up as if sucking down an ice cube. Finally Tom shook his head, let out a quick breath, made his way over to the liquor cabinet and poured a wisp of scotch into a short crystal glass. He brought the drink to Broomfield and forced it into his hands.

“Relax, Doc,” Tom said. “I wanted to show you all the trimmings so you’re in the loop. And this is how things are going to go. But I want you to know that Willie here, he’s being protected. He’s protected right now.”

Broomfield examined the hooch in his glass, swirled it twice, and took down the whole pour without any visible movement from his throat. “Well, if taking orders is the theme of the
day, believe you ought to take a few of mine,” the doctor said and held out his empty glass. “And you can start by pouring me another.”

Tom nodded, dashed in another healthy inch of scotch, and handed the glass back over to Broomfield again. “Anything for your nephew?”

“Twenty thousand dollars,” Broomfield said immediately. “And another twenty for me. That’s just for starters. I want him and his family given the same setup you finagled for Buford over there. A nice house, two-story, fenced yard, Bolter furniture, an oak-finished refrigerator, the works, all paid in full. For me, my price just went up ten percent for every grog house north of the line. And--”

“Whoa, whoa,” Tom interrupted the doctor’s string of demands. “You’re getting awful pushy there, fella. That’s a whole heap more than I’ve paid for any one--”

“Well, when you start asking for the most expensive thing in your whole damn life you better have your pocketbook ready. Your check-signing machine, too, because I’m just getting started you fucking filthy son-of-a-bitch. You’re lucky I’m even negotiating at all,” Broomfield spouted and stepped forward to Tom, putting his face an inch away from his nose. “I outta break this glass over your goddamn head and come rushing back here with every able-bodied nigger in the city to burn you down to the ground like the fucking Judas Iscariot turncoat you are.”

Tom stepped one pace closer to Broomfield, so close now that both men could smell what the other had had for breakfast. His words came out of his mouth as slow as changing weather. “I ever done wrong by you, Jack? Ever once?”

“You’re doing it now.”

“I’ll make you and your blubbering boy there the wealthiest blackies in the whole state from one minute to the next if you got enough patience to open your ears.”
“This ain’t about money,” Broomfield said, backing away two inches. “It’s about the stripe of a man when the chips are down and you just shown me yours.”

With a disparaging shake of his head, Tom plopped down on a leather ottoman next to the couch where Agnes Loebeck was seated and yanked his pant legs past his calf garters that held up his pink socks. “Well, you’re right on one account there, friend. It shore ain’t about money. It’s about this city’s government. And what the hell is government worth if don’t help people, huh?”

“This is your idea of help, is it?”

“Absolutely it is. Smith and his bunch, what good have they done for you and yours on the north side? They’ve put this city in a hole deeper than one’s ever been dug in under a year. We let ’em have two more and who knows if we’ll ever get out of it. But let me ask you, what are you willing to do for your fellow negroes?”

Broomfield shook his head and polished off the rest of his drink. “You’re asking me to put some of my folk at risk.” He gestured at his nephew who had finally calmed himself enough to quit crying. “To put a man beset by enough hardship as it is at risk.”

“There ain’t any risk to it,” Tom said, picked a cigarette out of a gold case, and packed it with three quick flicks before pressing it to his lips. “He’ll be protected, I assure you. There ain’t a safer place for him in the whole city than jail.”

He then nodded at officers Buford and Potach. Both men stepped forward and Potach—a white captain—took both of Willie’s hands and cuffed them behind his back. As soon as his wrists were clamped in the metal bracelets, Potach formally informed him that he was under arrest for the assault of Agnes Loebeck and Willie started in again with his incessant sobbing.
“I ain’t done it, though,” Willie cried, speaking his first words since coming into the hotel. “I ain’t done what they say I’ve done.”

Tom put a hand on his shoulder. “You won’t be away more than a day or two.”

Broomfield maneuvered himself between his nephew and the office door. “And what of his family?”

“Them too,” Tom said. “And all that heft you’re asking for? I’ll meet it and then some. They’ll never want for a thing for the rest of their days. But you gotta understand, the best way to kick the new guard out onto the street is to flex our muscle on the sidewalks.”

“So you thought my nephew’d be plum pudding for the--”

“Look it,” Tom cut in, “I could’ve picked any back alley bum for this thing, but I didn’t. I got me someone you know and therefore I know so we can keep him in good arms. Think, Doc. Why did we lose the Hall last year?”

Broomfield scoffed. “It ain’t no damn secret. City was sick of crime. Now you want more of it?”

“Exactly right. So we got us clean administration up there now. And that clean administration has got some polecat sitting in your former office. And look at all the good you did with it. Look at all the good you were able to wring out of it. But now some old-time powdered wig is saddled up at your desk and you can be damn sure he ain’t going to be thinking of your folks when it comes to churning time.”

“That’s one product you ain’t got to sell me. All that cleanliness, its gone and washed good business right out of my district.”

“That they have,” Tom said. “And what would be the worst thing to happen to a clean administration?”
“A dirty city,” Broomfield said with a sigh.

“That’s right.” Tom grinned. “So let’s make a mess.”

* * *

At six o’clock the previous morning, Victor Rosewater had come pounding on Tom’s front door with rubber boat shoes pulled over his Bluchers. At the sound of the loud knocking, all four of Tom’s wirehaired terriers were roused from their sleep in different spots around the house and began their cacophony of shrill barks. Tom was already awake and shaving with his straight razor in front of a mirror clouded with steam. As the knocking and barking continued, he toweled the cream off his cheeks, wiped his razor clean on the leather strop draped over his shoulder, and tucked his Colt pistol in the waistline of his drawstring pajama pants.

“Who’s there?” he asked as his terriers quieted down upon his arrival at the bottom of the stairs.

“It’s Victor. I’m alone.”

As Tom opened the door, Victor shuffled inside and wiped his galoshes on the floor mat. Out in the drive, a cabbie in red livery sat in the front of his electric hansom.

“Christ,” Tom said, “this better be urgent.”

Victor replied by handing Tom a typed copy of the article he had just written an hour ago back at the Bee Building--the same article that would report the rape of Agnes Loebeck, though this current draft lacked a couple of the more glaring details that would come to find the print page the next morning. As Victor dripped wet snow on the foyer tile, Tom scanned the article by holding his eyeglasses up to the paper like a magnifying glass. “This just happened last night?”
“Does it matter?”

“And you were privileged to this information how, exactly?”

“You might not have many friends left down at the police station, but that doesn’t mean I don’t.”

Tom pushed his spectacles up into his wet hair and handed the typed sheet back to Victor.

“Well, come in. I’ll put on some tea.”

“I don’t have the time for it just now. My cab is waiting.”

Tom turned and gave his maple wall clock a quick glance. “Come in and have some tea,” he said again, though this time it was not an invitation.

In the kitchen, shuffling his house slippers over the linoleum, Tom put a kettle of water on the stove to boil, removed two coffee cups from a cabinet above the sink, took his Colt auto out of his pajama pants and set it next to a jar of sugar on the counter as casually as if it were a utensil pulled from a drawer. “You know, I never gave your father any editorial advice and I don’t mean to give you some now, but this story could stand a little sprucing up.”

“A little fictionalization, you mean.”

Tom snorted to clear his nasal congestion. “No. The truth is always good enough. But deciding what part of the truth to emphasize, that’s where you get to use your, how should I say it, your journalistic discretion.”

“You mean slant,” Victor said, checked the face of his timepiece and dropped it back into his vest pocket.

Tom smiled. “Call it what you want, but the boys over at The Daily and The Republican will all be--”
“A bunch of printer’s devils,” Victor interrupted. “That’s the kind of thing that started the war.”

The kettle on the stovetop began to whistle. Tom lifted it off its coils, poured the boiling water into the mugs, added a spoonful of Bovril meat extract to each cup and stirred it vigorously for beef tea. “Wrong. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand started that particular tiff. But if it’s recent history that’s on your mind, there’s something you might learn if you listen. I know ever since your father died you’ve been chomping at the bit to get back to New York. Nine years you’ve been waiting. Your father would have never been that patient for something he wanted.”

“There’s strength in patience,” Victor said.

“Sloth, too. But now? Well, I can expedite that move for you, if you want,” Tom said and held a quart of milk at a tilt above Victor’s mug as he studied his reaction, then poured a swig into the cup.

“I don’t need your approval for that,” Victor said.

Tom handed him one of the mugs. “You’re in a mood this morning. What’s gotten into your knickers?”

Victor didn’t reply.

“Ol’ New York. The big city. Where all the real newspapermen work, right? You don’t think this kind of thing goes on there? Hell, you got a doctorate from Columbia, so you should know this better than anyone, but I’m going to tell you anyway.”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“You got nothing but time. But let’s just say the next forty-eight hours are very important for you. Which brings me back to what I was saying. You familiar with the name William Hearst?”
Victor sighed.

“Of course you are. Everyone knows of him, but I knew him, back in San Francisco when were both just pups. That’s not to say we’re chums or anything, but I was working at this little saloon over on Stevenson Street and I was there when he won The Examiner in a poker game.”

“His father gave him that paper.”

Tom slurped his tea. “You see, there you go again with what you think is truth, but it’s only part of the truth. That poker game was rigged. Papa Hearst owned the saloon, therefore he owned the way the cards were flopped and he owned the paper, too, and he--”

“You’re not telling me anything,” Victor said.

“Goddamnit!” Tom snapped and threw his mug across the room where it shattered against the wall. Victor was paralyzed by the outburst and the color went out of his face, but his eyes didn’t stop moving as Tom continued to say, with more restraint: “You think you’re so goddamned smart, but you ain’t you that smart. Now stop with your mumbling and listen to what I’m telling you. The Examiner was a penny paper. It was goddamn fish wrap. Never more than ten pages long and most of that was department store advertisements. But, low and behold, two years later along comes news of this scandal about this Prince of Austria and his baroness or what-have-you. A murder-suicide thing, chalk full of political conspiracy and international relevance and all that highfalutin stuff you think is so goddamn important. But nobody wants to read about that, and Hearst knew it. Took him two years of nearly going bankrupt to figure out what actually sold a paper, but he did finally figure it. So, what does he do with the biggest international story of the year? He splashes the coverage. He dresses it up into a drama that even housewives in their horn-rim spectacles wanted to read about as if it were the latest neighborhood gossip. Then before you know it The Examiner is selling more copies than they
can print. Same thing happened with the war in Cuba after he acquired *The Journal*. A boat blew up in Havana Harbor and what does Hearst do? He doesn’t spend a week waiting for a photograph of the wreckage, he prints an artist’s drawing of what the explosion might have looked the very next day that takes up three-fourths of page one and,” Tom said and slapped his hands together, “abracadabra, he’s got his own trademark eagle on his masthead, a daily circulation of fifty thousand and President McKinley reading his pages over his morning coffee in the oval office.”

“He’s a war hawk,” Victor said timidly.

“He’s a New York newsman, and a damn successful one, too. And you and him, you got a lot in common. His daddy was an editor who wanted to be a senator, just like yours. The only difference is that George Hearst actually got the gig. Same thing can happen with you. You want New York? You can have it. But you got to understand something first. I don’t know what you learned at Columbia, but if you want to sell papers, you got to sell drama.”

Victor turned his mug on the counter. “Do you want to write my articles for me? *The Bee*’s half yours anyway, and if that’s what it takes to get me out of this city--”

“That’s not what I want. You know what I want.”

“Why don’t you tell me anyway? And, just so we’re clear, if I do this thing for you, when it’s over, I am on a train headed east.”

Tom stepped around the counter, the soles of his slippers squeaking on the slick flooring, and put a firm grip on Victor’s shoulder. “After this you can take a train anywhere you want. I’ll ever be there to send you off waving my little hanky goodbye.”

Victor rolled his neck. “Listen, I’m willing to play this little game, but the kind of mud you want isn’t something I’m entirely comfortable with putting on page one.”
“There’s no need to be graphic, but details are important.”

“What kind of details?”

“Colorful ones.”

“You’re talking about race.”

“Sure. Race is color. Yellow, green. Black, white.”

“Those aren’t details. They’re fictions.”

Tom tipped his eyeglasses back down onto his nose and patted Victor on the stomach.

“And for nine years New York has been a fiction, too. For you.”

“This city is already on the brink of a race war and the whole world is tired enough of war as it is.”

“And hiding the truth won’t stop it from spilling over.”

“Well, this isn’t just splashing a bit of coverage, is it? This? What you’re asking me to do? It’s pure evil.”

“In a pig’s eye. What happened to Agnes Loebeck, that’s evil. This is just a bit of spin. Besides, a faint heart never earned a remembered name.”

Victor sighed. “You got a name?”

Top sipped from Victor’s mug after taking it out of his hand. “Name’s not important. Somebody without any affiliations. Any back alley bum will do.”

Victor snorted disparagingly. “So long as it’s a negro?”

Tom pointed at the printed draft of the article Victor was still holding in his hands. “Your report says it was an unidentified male.”
“That’s right. I talked with Agnes personally not more than two hours ago down at the station. It was dark when it happened and she was still very shaken up. She couldn’t describe him.”

“Exactly, it was dark. And so was her assailant.”

“Possibly.”

“Well, maybe after poor little Miss Loebeck settles down and gets her nerves about her, she’ll be able to remember more clearly. I’ll talk with her myself and see what’s what. Until then, you just hold your horses on putting it to print.”

“I’m sure you’ll guide her in whatever direction you want.”

“That’s another thing you need to learn if you ever want to make it in New York,” Tom said.

“What’s that?” Victor asked after a long moment.

“So long as people buy the news, the facts are for sale.”

* * *

William Brown was escorted to the top floor of the Douglas County Courthouse at nine in the morning on September 27th, 1919--just one hour after his uncle brought him to Tom’s office. His first day as a resident among 120 other prisoners passed without incident. His booking photograph was taken with a placard held to his chest which bore his name and date of birth in silver chalk. He showered in a cracked tile stall, changed into a set of navy blue prison overalls, and was put in a holding cell with eleven other coloreds. He was issued a cardboard-cover bible and served a dinner of fried baloney, a cup of cold vegetables, two slices of dry
bread, a chocolate bar, and tap water that had the taste of pennies. He didn’t sleep but for two hours of the night. The rheumatism that swelled in his knees and crawled up his back often deprived him of the act even at home in his own bed. Clutching the bible but never cracking its spine, he sat on his cot with his back pressed against the wall until the first hard beam of sunlight shot through his cell window.

The morning of September 28th began with a cloudless sky but forecasted heavy evening showers. The smoldering summer had turned to crisp fall in under a week, seemingly arriving with all the suddenness of an overnight milk train pulling into depot ahead of schedule. Dogwoods and Sycamores flashed licorice-colored leaves. Zephyrs carried the stench of pigsties across the river from Iowa. And, like early-arriving trains and easterly winds, rumors of Brown’s arrest began to circulate through pool halls where men playing eight ball left their games unfinished and stashed cues inside their autumn jackets. It spread across lunch counters where more men dashed out on dessert and slid steak knives into their trouser waistbands. Others filled their pockets with green-glass Coca-Cola bottles from trash bins and hid their .22s in their boots. The gossip continued to pass from ear to ear with all the veracity of a message slung between a tangle of tin can telephones. Much of the juice was spilt by Tom’s men in his bunkhouse wards and rumshops, instigating the roughest crowds, and the message was that action was to be taken against the villainous negro identified in all the dailies as Willie Brown.

By three in the afternoon, a crowd of scissorbills, yokel farmers, wandering teenagers, disgruntled war veterans and worried husbands that numbered nearly two-thousand strong had gathered outside Bancroft School in South Omaha where the fair-haired Agnes Loebeck had learned her arithmetic and geography as a girl. As men hawked tobacco juice on the sidewalk and posed around each other as if waiting for a snapshot to be taken, many of them described the
woman—even men who’d never laid eyes on so much as her photograph—as the loveliest little thing that could break your heart quicker than a plate dropped on the floor with a pastel ribbon in her braided hair and ankles as thin as a sapling twig and eyes so dark they’d make a jeweler favor a coal lump over a pink diamond.

Bottling the crowd in front of the schoolhouse was Milton Hoffmann and his war hero son Millard who’d lost his arm to a pineapple grenade in a sopping wet mushroom garden along the River Marne, walked with a crutch, and kept his left shirt sleeve folded and pinned to his shoulder. Together, the father and son razed the crowd into a froth with tales of Millard’s heroism in the trenches, his wedding date set for the coming May, and the condition of his fiancée who was laid up at St. Catherine’s on plastic sheets that caught the run-off spillage from the violence forced between her legs.

Speaking with a clear but soft tone to the hushed crowd, Millard recounted the events that occurred two nights earlier. He spoke of the way the negro sprung from a clump of park bushes as he was walking Agnes home and slugged him across the face with a gunnysack filled with rocks until he was dizzy and bleeding out of his ears on the park path. He illustrated the rough geometry of the negro’s sex entering his sweetheart and the calculated effort he took in peeling off her underpants after raising her skirt over her head. How he could only watch helplessly as she was violated not five feet from where he was struck motionless and oozing from the head.

For a largely unimaginative man, his story was filled with the all the crescendos and climaxes of a syndicated Mabel Urner story in the Wednesday papers. Every embellished falsehood rang as true as a noonday bell, flourished with the kind of redeye details that would make even the most iron-stomached men pass on Sunday supper: the residue of black skin left on his fiancée’s white thighs like soot marks, her shrill screams for help, the guttural sounds of
Willie’s breaths as heaved on top of her, his hands pinioning her wrists flat on the grass, the jingle of his belt on the gravel footpath, his bare feet arched into the ground for added thrust, and, finally, the quick theft of Millard’s wallet and Agnes’s engagement ring after the act was finished and their sawtooth assaultant dashed off into the night.

Spurred into action by the gristy tale, the crush of men marched from the school into downtown Omaha, shouting their intentions to “get the nigger”. In the time it took them to cover the three miles between Bancroft Avenue and the courthouse, thirty armed Omaha police, alerted to the possibility of some trouble over the telephone wire, were standing guard at the pillared breakfront of the building. At the head of the squad was newly elected police chief Roy Towl who’d already ordered every gunshop, foundry, pawnshop, and sporting goods store within a two mile radius to be closed for the day to keep the mob from arming themselves with shop theft.

As the crowd neared, Towl and his men stood shoulder to shoulder with their pistols and shotguns drawn to intercept the mob. Three young men at the head of the procession were banging bass drums slung down from shoulder straps. Many were armed with bats and bricks and coal picks. Some were no older than thirteen. As they formed in front of the courthouse, the tramping of two-thousand cork-soled and leather-booted feet came to a halt.

Roy Towl, his uniform heavily starched, raised the flat of his hand over his eyes to shield the angling sun and stepped out to the curb. “What is the meaning of this congregation? If you’ve coming looking for trouble, you’ve found more than your lot can handle.”

“C’mon, chief,” Milton Hoffmann said, shouldering his way to the front of the mob. “No trouble here. We under our rights to an assembly. It’s in the consty-tution.”
“You have a right to a peaceful assembly. But there isn’t anything peaceful about your intentions here,” Towl said as the crowd began to shift and spread out across the entire length of Farnam Street.

“We ain’t about no mischief, chief,” Milton replied and, with a shrug, looked back at the mob. “Not so long as you don’t count boredom a crime. We just passing the time between lunch and supper is all.”

The majority of the crowd, at least those who could hear the exchange, let out a communal laugh.

“What about a job?” Towl said. “That’s what most people do to pass the time.”

“If you got one of them lying around somewheres, I’ll take it,” a voice yelled out and the retort was greeted by more laughter and a few disgruntled cheers.

“You know what we want,” Milton added immediately. “Just you hand over that nigger and you won’t get no guff from us.”

Towl placed his hands on his belted hips. “Nobody’s handing over anything and you can be sure of that. So if you want to mill around wasting this fine weather, you have every right to do so. But let me warn you, any man who attempts to set foot on this property will be shot without hesitation.”

“We don’t want no nigger,” another voice called. “We came for the girls!”

“Yeah, chief, we want to see us some flesh. Show us your legs!” another wiseacre joked and more laughter erupted.

“Show us your tits, boys!” a third voice heckled and, with that last taunt, even Roy Towl broke a smile and many of his officers laughed as well.
The mood of the crowd then turned from tense to jovial and, for the better part of the next hour, the standoff between the mob and the squad of officers passed without any threat of violence. The demonstrators traded jokes and chummy banter with the police as if the two groups were chitchatting at a church social. While the two lines were held as taut as piano wire, the police grew lax enough to holster their pistols. It seemed neither side was ready to take action against the other, but Towl ordered his men to stay on guard until the crowd dispersed. As the dinner hour approached, a roll of thick wall clouds was pushing through the apricot sky, a distant rainband moving in from the north. In that time, the crowd had doubled in size, pushing its outer edges back to the far sidewalk, engulfing the whole of Farnam Street. As six o’clock neared, the phalanx of spectators appeared as harmonious as a plainsong despite their voluminous numbers.

Meanwhile, back at his Dodge Hotel office, Tom had conducted the day as he had so many others before it: sitting behind his desk to field the wishes and concerns from a line of people that filled the outer hallway. Between meetings, all of whom he saw individually, he stood from his desk and spied out of his eastern window by fingering open a slant in his blinds. From his top floor, he could see the mass of people gathered on the street in front of the courthouse.

He lifted the earpiece off his telephone stand and made two calls before closing up his office for the day. The first was to the Bee offices to ensure that enough newsmen were present capturing snapshots of the mob for the morning papers. The second was to Dr. Broomfield at the Midway to relieve him that his nephew was still more than safe, locked up on the top floor of the courthouse, and that all reports were that the crowd was losing interest and would more than likely flitter away before the sun set. His dinner was served to him by a bellhop on a wheeled cart: lamp chops with cannelloni beans and chili sauce, a glass of pear juice, and a slice of
custard pie. After finishing his meal alone, Tom grabbed his frock off the coat tree, took one final glance out his window, walked down the rear stairwell and out into the day for the first time since arriving early in the morning. Harry Buford was waiting for him at the wheel of his Hudson. After pulling the choke and pushing the ignition button, he drove Tom home through the early evening streets where shadows lengthened from steep rooftops, the distant drone of chain-driven lawnmowers were clipping grasses as short as carpet, and a group of children chased around a young boy guiding a wooden soapbox racer constructed with wheels from a baby carriage down a sloping sidewalk.

Just under two miles away, on an entirely different sidewalk in front of the courthouse, all that separated William Brown from certain death was a squadron of police officers paling around with each other and the crowd. As the standoff continued, filled with more banter than alarm, a young man barely fifteen years old with carrot-orange hair, corduroy trousers hitched up to his stomach, and a moth-eaten beret entirely too big for his narrow head barked out a racial slur at the lone black officer on duty. A trio of his friends also joined in, goading the policeman with catcalls and cursory remarks about his skin color. The officer pretended not to hear their taunts, which only infuriated the youths further.

Then a pistol shot rang out.

The officer was hit clean in the left side of his belly, just below his heart. He fell to his knees and hunkered over his wound. His tall hat blew off his head with a gust of wind. In his last remaining breaths, he returned fire and caught the boy who shot him in the side of his neck with a single bullet. The orange-haired teen grabbed at his throat as if choking and dropped his mousegun to the pavement. Blood as dark as beet juice poured down his shirtfront. His friends rushed to his side and, though his mouth was open, he couldn’t speak. In a matter of seconds,
both the officer and the young man were dead. For the briefest of moments not one person in the street moved.

   The siege of the courthouse had begun.

   The mob, now numbering nearly five thousand, charged the building. In a few simultaneous flashes, Roy Towl and his men withdrew their pistols and formed back into a strict line guarding the courthouse steps, the crowd erupted into a frenzy and numerous objects--bricks, rocks, chunks of broken pavement, glass bottles--were slung at the officers and courthouse windows. Gunshots echoed, many of them fired into the air by the police as warning shots. A group of professional strikebreakers at the head of the mob--men with biceps as big as bread loaves and orangutanish hands--lead by Milton Hoffmann and his son, urged the crowd into storming the building to get the nigger out of his cell.

   A man with a slouch hat saddled on a quarter horse rode to the front swell of the horde, carrying a braided towrope sixteen feet in length--strong enough to hoist a piano to a rooftop. Many of Tom’s errand boys and roughhousers distributed guns and ammunition along the outer edges of the crowd from the back of parked wagons. Four women in cotton print dresses--two of them prostitutes and all former classmates of Agnes Loebeck at Bancroft Elementary--handed out stones from water pails.

   Within ten minutes, the mob surrounded the courthouse on all sides like a moat of wool hats and box caps. As the assault party converged, the police drew back inside the building after being struck by rocks and pellets. Chief Towl was bleeding profusely from being hit in the forehead with a lobbed brick and mopped at his wound with a green neckerchief. He ordered all the first-floor doors to be barred with wooden rods. With no outside force to slow the mob’s progression, soon nearly every window was smashed to smithereens and shards of glass as fine
as powder covered the ground like a light snow dusting. The ping of bullets and the shattering of windowpanes filled the air. Fire bombs sailed through the first floor county office windows. The flames ate away at the desks and climbed the walls to the ceiling.

By the time the sun had set, a group of men tapped a filling station across the street and used the gasoline to soak the basement after breaking into the building through a backdoor. When the first wave of the crowd stampeded into the south entrance of the courthouse, the officers inside were waiting with a pair of fire hoses attached to a metal stairwell spool. They used the pressurized spray to beat back the rioters. When the masses finally muscled past the onslaught of water, the officers turned the hoses on the flames. They were able to douse much of the fire, but a few men armed with axes chopped through the hoses and more flames were ignited.

While the wreckage worsened, Mayor Smith arrived on the scene under the guard of twenty more officers and was escorted into the building through the hysterical mob. Four of the policeman who surrounded him were struck to the ground. Two were beaten unconscious with bats. Another was shoved through one of the only remaining glass pane windows. At his behest, the mayor was ushered up the only serviceable staircase to the top floor where prisoner William Brown was sitting in his cell, alone and silent. He was staring at the blank wall opposite his cot. His expression was one of serenity. The mayor sized him up for moment but did not say a word. Then he ordered all the prisoners, all one-hundred and twenty of them, including Mr. Brown, to be taken to the roof to avoid the fire for as long as possible. Once on the roof, the police ordered everyone to lay flat on their stomachs to avoid gunfire from the street below.

As the flames spread up to the second floor, two cherry-red, Mack fire pumpers arrived on the scene, pushing through the crowd until they were surrounded and unable to advance. The
firemen fought back their attackers and managed to hook up their cloth hoses to a pair of hydrants, but they were cut by the mob just like the indoor hoses. One truck was rocked and back forth by forty men until it tipped over. The ladders were stolen and leaned against the front of the courthouse.

The most daring members of the raid climbed the rungs to get to the third floor windows. Others scaled drainpipes and vertical gutters to the upper levels of the building, their coat flaps whipping in the air. Spindrifts of smoke whirled and eddied in the sky as the hour approached nine o’clock. To assist the climbers, the remaining bulk of the crowd still on the ground shined spotlights from automobiles to guide their ascent, swathing the courthouse in bright balloons of fixed light. At least thirty men had managed their way onto the second and third floors of the building and, to slow their progression, police discharged warning shots from their rifles down an elevator shaft.

Also on the top floor, the remaining officers who had first guarded the front of the building under the direction of Chief Towl readied to make their final stand. Three policeman were locked in a safety vault by the progressing mob who’d made their way up the stairs. When they hacked their way out through an adjacent wall to escape, they were shot and killed, their badges and pistols stolen. Two other officers made farewell calls to their family on the only phone lines still in service, but were reprimanded by Towl, who told them, “Get off that wire and do your duty. Are you resigned to death already or are you going to fight off these heathens?”

Mayor Smith, sensing that the only course of action to save the courthouse was to take on the mob himself, stuck his head out of a fourth-floor window to address the masses. He waved and hollered at the crowd until finally a pair of spotlights fixated upon him and the noise
dwindled. As he was about to speak, someone on the street cried out, “Give us the nigger and save your courthouse!”

“Stop this madness!” Smith shouted back. “I am coming back down and I want to have your attention before this goes any further!”

“If you coming down bring that rapin’ nigger with you!” another voice replied.

Then, shaking his head and retreating from the window, Mayor Smith hustled down the same back staircase he’d used to get to the top floor. Fifteen officers escorted him through the smoke. As he descended the steps, two jars of formaldehyde burst in the hallway, seeping out a poisonous gas that ended up putting two more policeman in the hospital. When he finally arrived on 17th Street from the east entrance in a daring show of courage, the mayor flapped his arms wildly, screaming for silence, but the demands of the mob did not change:

“Give us that goddamned nigger, mayor!”

“Save the lives of your officers! No one nigger is worth any amount of police!”

“Hand over Willie and let justice be served to him!”

In response, the mayor steadied himself in front of the mob and said, “I ask you all to give up this violence now. I will never condone murder. I won’t give up this man. I’m going to enforce the law, even with my own life!”

The crowd mumbled and groaned.

Then, a high-pitched voice rang out: “Let’s string him up! He’s a nigger-lover. They elected him. He’s no better than that coon!”

Smith raised his arms in the air again in a sign of resignation as the horde surrounded him. “If you must have somebody, then let it be me!”
As soon as those words were spoken, he was rushed on all sides. The crowd pushed and shoved the mayor through the street, his body taking multiple blows until he came squirming out of the engulfment on the corner of 16th and Harney. A man cradling a blue-stocked shotgun aimed both barrels at the mayor while another slipped a noose over his neck. A third fellow lifted Smith up by his armpits and carried him over to the base of an electric street pole. The other end of the rope was tossed over the metal arm of the traffic signal tower and, together, four people hoisted his body into the air. Mayor Smith grabbed at the hangman’s knot with both hands, attempting to loosen it from his throat. His feet dangled and kicked. A light rain was falling, thin as mist. A bluetick coonhound barked and snapped at his shoe soles. Someone in the crowd pleaded for sanity, screaming: “He’s a white man, for God’s sake! Use a little judgment. Don’t be a bolsheviki!”

But the rioters would not listen. With five heavy pulls of the rope, the mayor was ten feet above the ground and he’d given up struggling. His hands fell slack at his sides as his body twirled in the air like a heavy sack. Yet, not more than a minute after being raised up on the noose, two police cars bulldozed through the masses and struck the base of the pole at a speed of twenty-five miles an hour. The men on the other end of the rope let go of their grasp and Mayor Smith fell onto the police car’s hood with a smack. He was still alive and gasping.

He wrangled the noose from his neck and the officers who had driven the cars onto the corner sidewalk exited the vehicles with their rifles drawn. Eight shots were fired into the crowd as the police formed a circle around their mayor. Quickly they helped him into the backseat of the first car, backed up from the bent traffic tower, and speed away with the mayor in tow, en route to Ford Hospital. His neck was severely bruised, four of his ribs were broken, his face would receive fifteen stitches above his left eyebrow, but he would survive his assault.
William Brown would not.

A block and a half away from where the mayor nearly lost his life, the courthouse continued to burn. News camera flashbulbs and pistols flared in the dark. The roof on which the prisoners laid flat on their bellies had melted down into a jam from the intense heat one story below. The forecasted evening showers finally began to fall and the night sky opened up in a downpour. For nearly twenty minutes the rain was so heavy that the Leavenworth streetcars ceased their routes. The pavement sounded like a teakettle filling with spray from a tap. But even as the fall thunderstorm soaked the avenues, the courthouse fired blazed out of control. Fifteen police officers including Roy Towl, ten jail guards, and one-hundred twenty prisoners stranded on the roof were losing hope of survival. Finally, in the midst of the spreading flames that had reached the third floor, notes began falling from the roof. They fluttered down to the street below in seesaw motions. One of the handwritten scraps, picked up by Milton Hoffmann, read: “Spare us our lives and we will leave you the man you want.”

And so William Brown was finally handed over to the mob.

He was pushed down a flight of smoking stairs into the hands of six protestors. Still dressed in his blue prison coveralls and clutching his bible, Willie allowed himself to be taken by the crowd without a fight. The stairwell was so packed with men that he was passed over their heads down each floor until he reached the main level of the courthouse. As he was drug out of the building, he cried over and over, “I am innocent. I never did it! My God, I’m innocent!”

The remaining prisoners and police on the roof made their escape down fire truck ladders and through the last remaining staircase to safety just as the top of the courthouse collapsed. Roy Towl was the last man to escape with his life.
It was shortly before ten o’clock at night when William Brown was clubbed to the ground by the mob. As soon as he was yanked into the street past the courthouse doors, the crowd stripped off his clothes and castrated him. His naked body, slick with blood, was pummeled from every angle. A rope was looped around his neck, the other end tied off to the bumper of a black Oldsmobile, and he was drug through the streets at speeds that topped thirty miles an hour. Countless bullets were fired into his body as the Oldsmobile toured his corpse through the avenues. After a few passes through the main thoroughfares of the downtown business district, the auto stopped at the corner on the south side of the courthouse. The rope knotted to the bumper was flung over a cast iron trolley pole and his body was hoisted into the air like a sail drawn up a mast. He twirled from the impact of bullets and slugs fired from the street.

Still unsatisfied, the mob lowered his corpse to the ground again and set it atop a pyre made from a collection of old wooden pallets and loose lumber. His arms were spread and braced underneath a heavy beam of beechwood as if being crucified on his back. They soaked the pyre with oil from red danger lamps stolen from a nearby road construction site and lit it ablaze. Fire streamed out of his charred remains. It shot from of his mouth as if he was screaming flames. Flesh melted over his skull. The rest of his skin was singed black and peeled off into the air like tiny scraps of ash. Over a thousand people gathered to watch him burn. They smiled and hugged each other as if celebrating a last-second sporting victory in a gymnasium. People posed for snapshots for the newsboys, arms over shoulders. After the fire was doused, what was left of William Brown’s smoking bones was tied for a second time to the back of the Oldsmobile and drug through the streets for two more hours.

Men and women lined the sidewalks to get a glimpse of the passing body. Children clapped, danced, and sang songs of joy. More people were present to witness the toting of his
corpse than the attendance of the annual Knights of Aksarben parades featuring electrified floats on the very same stretch of Farnam Street. It was nearly two in the morning when the crowds finally lost interest and dispersed. By that time, the courthouse fire was finally extinguished but most its structure was ruined beyond repair. What was left of William Brown’s body was buried in Potter’s Field under a cypress log carved with only one word: Lynched. The rope that had been used to hang him was cut into small pieces and sold as souvenirs at the price of a dime an inch.

At three in the morning, some sixteen hundred federal troops from Fort Crook and Fort Omaha were dispatched into the city, placing it under the control of Martial Law. They took up posts on the corners of prominent intersections throughout North and South Omaha as well as the heart of the business district. Machine guns mounted on flat tripods were stationed by troops of the twelfth infantry wearing doughboy helmets and knee-high rubber boots. Of all the race riots that had occurred throughout the country that summer, it was the single largest presence of enlisted men to any of those emergencies and they remained in Omaha until the middle of October. City commissioner W.G. Ure stepped in as acting mayor for Parsons Smith who would remain in the hospital for three weeks, Major General Leonard Wood took temporary command of the police force and, eventually, the Douglas County Courthouse would be rebuilt at a cost of half a million dollars.

As the sun broke on the morning of September 29th, the city was once again at peace. Daily routines continued on as if no violence had ever occurred. Early morning trains hustled out of the Union Station and Burlington depots where people waited for connections to Denver or Indianapolis or Chicago with every face hidden by the open flaps of a newspaper. The rattle of fire-fly motors and four-cylinder autocars filled the streets. Breakfast sausages were sold from
sidewalk carts. Gumball machines were stocked outside penny-candy shops. The Leavenworth and Douglas Street trolleys began their morning routes. Riverboats navigated the sun-streaked waters of the Missouri. Games of fan-tan and pinochle commenced in the backrooms of chop suey cafés. Whiskey was snuck into tin coffee cups in blind pigs by ordering “a dash of pepper for my milk”, as caution was the ultimate watchword. Pickle trucks left dark stains from their undercarriages on the pavement in front of delis. Chaser lights on marquees dimmed as hatcheck girls scurried home after their late-night shifts, some of them stopping to buy cigarettes at corner magazine stands.

And, stepping out his Gold Coast home at eight sharp, Tom Dennison greeted Harry Buford in his driveway with a hearty hug, asking him about the safety of his family. A terrible, terrible tragedy, Tom told him. The city has forever scarred itself, he added as he climbed into the backseat and Buford, solemn and tight-lipped, drove him to Hansom Park to begin the day as he had so many before it, a bag of sunflower seeds in his lap and a white carination pinned to his lapel.

Across town, tucked away in the rear office of his Midway, Dr. Jack Broomfield poured over the front page article in his Monitor newspaper. The headline read: “Omaha Bows in Shame”. On a tray in the middle of his desk was a glass of seltzer water and a tin of aspirin. After chewing four of the pills dry, he reread the editorial which he’d written himself, staying up nearly all the night to compose its three long paragraphs, the final one of which read:

Omaha is a weaker city today than it was yesterday. For many years Omaha has been as safe for its citizens as any city in the country. Today it is no longer. While there is no one to blame but ourselves, two outfits more than other must carry the burden for this travesty. The first
is the jungle rule of this city’s ghastly political machinery. The second is the yellow journalism of the *Omaha Bee*. There is no more rotten a press than that junket and, without the publication of its sordid lies condemning an innocent man for a crime he did not commit, William Brown would still be alive today. Yet, who can obey the law when there is no law to protect those who need it most? If this is to be the darkest day in the whole of the city’s history, we can be all the more glad that it is past. But we can only proceed with the fear that it is not, and, in that fear, this city will always live in the shadow of last night’s events. From this day forth, every citizen within its gates will be marked by this scar.

After untwisting the bulb in his study lamp, dimming the office to near blackness, the doctor unhooked his wire-rimmed spectacles from his ears one at a time and folded them into the breast pocket of his silk pajamas. From his combination safe, he gathered four tapped stacks of bills—a total of fifteen thousand dollars—and sealed them inside a thick manila envelope. He addressed the package to the care of Mrs. Emily Brown and placed it in a bin for the outgoing mail. Standing from his desk, he unlocked the top drawer to retrieve his heavy-frame Colt revolver. With a flick, he snapped opened the cylinder and loaded two half-moon clips from a matchbox into the chambers. Tilting his head back, he pressed the barrel under his chin and fired a single shot through his head without hesitation. The .45 caliber bullet didn’t stop until it was buried three inches deep in the ceiling. When his secretary rushed into the office after hearing the shot, she flipped on the lights to find his body supine on the gray carpet, a stain widening from his head in the fibers.

Not twenty minutes after Dr. Broomfield took his own life, Mayor Parsons Smith awoke for the first time since being admitted to Ford Hospital eleven hours earlier. His wife and three
children were at his side. Both of his eyes were heavily bruised. It took great effort to keep them open. His neck was covered in a stiff brace that kept him from moving his head to the side. A ladder of stitches was sewn above his left eye. He attempted to sit up only to be urged against it by the nurse who told him to relax and refrain from speaking. One of his broken ribs had punctured his lung. After the nurse held his head up, cradling his neck so he could take a sip of water, the mayor looked at his wife and grabbed her hand.

“Did they get him?” he asked hoarsely.

His wife looked away and wiped her eyes.

“Did they get that boy?” he asked again, clenching her hand.

His wife nodded solemnly and, reaching over to a small table next to her husband’s hospital bed, picked up the copy of The Monitor with the article written by Dr. Broomfield.

“You’re going to hear it sooner or later, so it might as well be from me,” she said and, clearing her voice, began to read.
Book Three: The Game is Worth the Cost

For three decades Dennison’s life was charmed and he led his forces with guile and cleverness through years of victories. As time passed, the machine began to overestimate itself and underestimate its enemies, a major miscalculation the powerful and arrogant repeatedly succumb to despite a succession of fallen Goliaths.

Orville D. Menard
Professor Emeritus at the University of Nebraska at Omaha
A pink sun, clear winter sky, street trolleys collecting electricity from their overhead wires as they began their morning routes, church bells clearing their belfries of roosting pigeons, and, in the center of the Aksarben Bridge, a maroon Cadillac Coupe--license plate number NEB 3126--sat with its engine turned off and both front doors ajar. It was a quarter past nine o’clock on Sunday morning, December 11, 1931.

Frost shimmered like glass on the Aksarben’s metal trusses. The bridge lights were still on despite the brightness of the early day. A cordon of police cruisers--Ford Model A hardtops--blocked off each end of the bridge on both the Iowa and Nebraska sides. A group of uniformed officers and trench-coat detectives with dizzily-patterned neckties milled about, examining the Cadillac. Crouched down with his elbows on his knees at the rear of the coupe was the Omaha police chief Roy Towl. Now forty-three years old, his once dense black hair was thinning considerably at the temples and shot through with a streak of silver as distinct as a skunk stripe. A white octagon patch on his shoulder sleeve signified his rank--once a Pinkerton, once a federal agent, now chief of police and a candidate for mayor in next year’s May elections on the Anti-Saloon Ticket. He looked in again at the driver seat of the Cadillac which was charred in spots, the tan leather still slightly smoking.

As he surveyed the crime scene, other officers showed him the evidence they’d accumulated so far: a cigar stub burnt to a blackened crisp found against the Cadillac’s left rear tire, swipes of blood on the southern bridge railing, a five-gallon gasoline can emptied of its contents, and a cloche hat that belonged to the woman with a rear entry bullet wound in her head.
fifteen feet from the coupe. The size of the hole at the base of her skull--nearly two inches wide--had to have been made by a large caliber bullet from a shotgun or rifle, but no shell casing had yet been found. The woman was identified as Claire McArthur from the identification in her purse tucked in the Cadillac’s front seat. She was barefoot. Both of her shoes--a pair of dress pumps--were left on the bridge, kicked off during her short run. She was soaked in the same kerosene puddled on the floorboards of the coupe, but was without burn marks.

Wet, slightly bloodied handprints were left on the brick pavement of the bridge ten feet out from the driver’s side door. More blood stained the door itself, some of it inside the rubber tracks. Traces of cigar ash were discovered on the floor of the toll booth. A further search of the vehicle produced two packed suitcases--one full of men’s clothing, the other with a female’s, a leather portmanteau, a guitar case, and three cans of motor oil; all signs that the passengers of the Cadillac were not on errand, but a trip.

Already a fishing dredge and a snagboat were combing the river as part of the police drag, hoping to locate whomever may have gone over the side of the bridge. As Roy paced around the car, hands on his hips, he looked out at the phosphorescent river. Two of his detectives walked up the bridge from the Omaha side with a young man dressed in a toll worker’s uniform.

“Hey chief,” one of the detectives who’d found the toll worker seated along the counter at Bell’s Diner said before bringing the man over. “This guy here, this Pete Abbott, employee for the department of roads--”

“Our toll bridge teller,” Roy said.

“He says that about two hours ago three men came walking up the bridge and offered him thirty-five dollars to split for a while.”
Roy looked over at the toll worker who was nervously sucking on a cigarette, his change dispenser still slung across his chest. “Is he aware he can be prosecuted?”

“Man’s scared senseless. He says one of those fellas had a gun,” the detective said. “You want to talk to him?”

“Not at the moment. Take him down to the station and wait for me.”

The detective nodded and, just as he was walking away, another officer came up to Roy wagging a pencil in his hand. “You want me to run back into town and check on that license plate number?”

“No. That can wait, too. I already know who this vehicle belongs to.”

The officer paused. “Oh yeah? Who’s that?”

Roy snapped open a handkerchief with a flick of his wrist like a dinner napkin, wiped his nose and said, “George Lapidus.”

* * *

The second trial of Tom’s life began on October 11, 1932, exactly ten months after the murders on the Aksarben Bridge. Unlike his first arraignment sixteen years earlier where he’d been cockish enough to sport his tangerine and apricot suits, chitchatted with the bootlicking newsboys in the courthouse hallways as if the whole proceeding was some petty squabble between old pals, delivered inch-thick envelopes to jurors in their hotel rooms, had the judge quaking in his robe and, later, roasted to the cowhide seat of his four-cylinder jalopy, unlike all of that, Tom’s second go-round with the legal system in the very same building—in fact, on the very same floor—was a much hotter fight.
Gone were the confectionary colors of his suits. Gone was his soothsaying demeanor with the press and his quotable quips about easy-chair-hour politics. Gone was the possibility of sneaking any dough up to the hotel rooms of the dozen men who held his verdict under their hats. Gone was a judge who he could have carted off to a grocer basement with a bag over his head at midnight or dynamited in his own car. Gone were his ex-wives--both of them. And, more than anything else, gone was the fight in the man who’d lost very few of them in his entire life.

The Tom Dennison who took to the fourth-floor of the Douglas County Courthouse on that mid-October morning in 1932 was unrecognizable from the Tom Dennison who, almost two decades earlier, had turned his trial into an easy piece of afternoon theatre.

Also gone was image. No longer was the man who sat at the defense table sharply-shouldered with a shoestring physique and a silvery but full head of hair. No longer was he the man who rolled up to the courthouse in his glittering saloon cars and clip-clopped up the stone steps as if attending a ceremony in his honor and not a trial in his defense. No longer did he radiate a confidence that inspired most men to think he could cut any verdict he wanted out of whole cloth and trim away the edges like excess pie crust.

Instead, in its place, was an old man who everyone referred to as “The Old Man”--many out of affection, some in jest. He wore every day of his seventy-three years on his face, bald head, and liver-spotted hands. Now, on the first day of his second trial, he crept up the same stone steps with a great deal of his weight reliant on the balance of his gold-headed walking sticking and slumped down in his wooden swivel chair with labored breath.

Yet, much more than the decline of his physical appearance or the incline of his political animus, the biggest difference between Tom’s first court date for charges of electoral fraud and his current battle against the federal government for conspiracy to violate the Volstead Act was
time. His first trial lasted a little more than two weeks. His second would drag on for two months.

It was nine o’clock on a gusty Wednesday morning when prosecuting attorney Lawrence Sandall rose to give his opening statement. Outside the double-hung courthouse windows, trees were bursting with autumn color. A torrential downpour was turning the sidewalks into cascades and streaming in unbroken curtains from the cornices of building ledges. Sandall was a rising star in the D.A.’s office and headed the prosecution team along with James Moorehead, a prohibition department attorney from Washington, and two assistants, Edson Smalls and Phillip Shaw.

Of all the points he outlined to the jury that Wednesday morning (that Dennison had established a liquor syndicate in Omaha “on the Capone plan” and that the police department aided in protecting the syndicate’s interests), Sandall’s primary goal was to establish that a feud had existed between Tom Dennison and George Lapidus who was mysteriously slain the previous December, his burnt and bloated body found a month and half later by a father and son fishing along a yellow mud flat in the Smoky Hill drainage basin.

Among the key defendants were Billy Nesselhous and Milton Hoffmann, who, along with Tom himself, were represented by Benjamin Baker—a young lawyer known for his shrewd logic, purple suits worn with white sneakers scuffed up worse than a pair of gym shoes, and outright lack of subtlety. He was as thin as a lamppost, wore octagon spectacles and, being born and raised in Bismarck, spoke with a North Dakotan accent. When asked, recently-elected district attorney Bert Stahlmaster—who’d taken over the position from his long time boss, Christian Sorensen—called Baker a “whippersnapper” with “an air of peacockishness” in the press.
In response to the district attorney, Baker gave an interview to *The Omaha Bee* one week before the trial began, in which he stated: “If that’s the harshest barb that my esteemed brother-of-the-bar can dish out, why, he’d better go back to law school to learn some new slurs.”

In prelude to the start of the trial, Judge Woodrough--sixty years old, spidery-veined, and bald with a double chin--informed the jury about the nature of the charges, saying: “Each of the fifty-three defendants in this case, including Mr. Dennison, have been charged under one conspiracy to violate liquor laws. In order for you to find them guilty and hand down any convictions, the government must prove at least one overt act on the part of at least one defendant. They must also show that the other defendants conspired to have that act committed. So, I warn you, any defendant to whom the proof does not apply must be acquitted.”

The jury consisted of fourteen men--twelve regulars plus two alternates in case of any illness or unforeseen absence. Every man was selected from a grand jury pool of 125 candidates during the peremptory hearings and their professions were: six farmers (two of them retired), a stenographer, carpenter, rancher, poultry man, oil station manager, and three insurance salesmen.

Baker’s lone question for each of the possible jurors during his share of the peremptory challenges was: “Are you wet or dry?”

Of those he was able to select in his favor, such answers included: “Oh, about half and half” and “I’m as wet as the Pacific” and “I’m not a very good prohibition man, if that’s what you’re after.”

The judge’s bench was situated at the east end of the courtroom. To his left was the jury box and, to his right, desks for the court clerk and court reporter. The gallery was filled to capacity everyday. A small balcony at the rear of the room was reserved for newspapers reporters. Six bailiffs were on duty for the entire length of the trial under the charge of Deputy
United States Marshal Earl Young. Their chief task was to provide constant guard for the jury members who were housed at the Hill Hotel to prevent tampering and possible assassination attempts.

Baker had asked for a continuance on behalf of Tom’s illnesses: hypertension of his retinal blood vessels, high blood pressure, as well as a partial loss of motor function and occasional but severe trembling in his left hand following a stroke he suffered the previous Christmas. The request to postpone the trial for reasons of health were declined by Judge Woodrough, as prohibition agents had witnessed Tom operate under his own power in his downtown wards during the two months leading up to his court date. On the day the trial began, Tom was two weeks away from his seventy-fourth birthday. At certain points during the litigation, he would sit at the defense table with his eyes closed as if asleep.

Harry Buford--Tom’s longtime chauffer turned government star witness--was in attendance as a spectator for the afternoon session on the first day of the rum trial when Benjamin Baker began the defense’s opening statement. Two armed federal agents and Dean Kookier, a Chicago Secret Six investigator, guarded Buford from his seat behind a desk in the northeast corner of the courtroom. They made no attempt in concealing their purpose as they held their Winchester rifles slack across their stomachs.

Buford had not been seen in Omaha, or anywhere for that matter, since December 28th the previous year--just seventeen days after the murder of George Lapidus. For the past ten months his whereabouts had been unknown, as he and his family were taken into federal custody by Kookier and placed under his protection in Chicago. So when Buford entered the courtroom that afternoon--the man who for so long served as Dennison’s closest daily associate but had turned
whistle-blower for the U.S. attorney’s office--the entire room let out one communal gasp. As Buford took his seat, he kept his head down and did not once look over at the defense table.

As court came to order for the afternoon, Baker paced the front of the courtroom in his trademark plum suit coat, his canvas sneakers squeaking against the tile floor, his hair gleaming with tonic and plastered to his scalp tighter than a swimming cap. He fiddled nervously with his tulip-style wristwatch as he came to the heart of his opening argument, firing off barbs against the suspended Omaha police officer:

“The prosecution’s principal witness seems to be Harry Buford, a man who, among others, has been given an immunity bath and who, though their sins were scarlet, are now white as snow. The prosecution speaks of motives on the part of the defendants. But what are the motives of the prosecution witnesses who are to testify for the government?

“It is because they get immunity from punishment of their crimes. Buford is not here in repentance, but because of promises and coercion. The facts, when they are all in, will show that no liquor conspiracy ever existed. Mr. Sandall’s theory about laws governing conspiracy is astounding. The indictment has named a large number of persons and all of them happen, for some reason, to be known by Harry Buford. It appears that every crime and every misdemeanor that’s happened in this city in the last ten years was taken part in by Buford while an Omaha police officer. So either he’s lying or he possesses omnipotent powers. I’ll let you decide which is the truth.

“Even if Mr. Buford did have involvement in so many of these alleged crimes, it’s a wonder why no charges were filed against him. Well, it’s not a wonder, actually. The solicitation of immunity from the United States attorney was all it took. And what you will be given from Buford is a fabrication of stories that are pure invention. Government counsel tells about a
political organization headed by my client,” Baker said and looked at Tom who was sitting, once again, with his eyes closed. Though his eyes were shut and he looked to be asleep, Tom was alert and listening closely to every word.

“All that has happened in Omaha is charged to Dennison,” Baker continued. “Yet, statistics show that Omaha has had less crime in the past decade than any other city of its size. I don’t claim credit for Dennison because of this, but I have as much right to do so as the prosecution has to blame all the crimes committed in this city on him. It’s a tactic that Sandall and his bunch hope will inflame you. If there had been evidence of these crimes carried on over a period of years, why has the prosecution slept? Yes, there is no doubt that Mr. Dennison has political clout in this city. But having such influence is not a crime, and, gentlemen of the jury, the sole purpose of the prosecution is to break down that influence rather than enforcing prohibition laws. Yet, what they will fail to prove and what I will succeed at is this: Thomas Dennison is not a criminal, not by any standard.”

* * *

Prohibition dawned in Nebraska on May 1, 1917, nearly two years before the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified and the entire nation went dry. By January of 1920, while the rest of the country was scrambling to stockpile reserves, while tavern signs were lowered off of storefronts and carted away in wooden-wheeled wagons, and while moonshine men were moving their stills into the frosty woods as the clock clicked down the start date for the Noble Experiment, Tom Dennison--given a thirty-month head start--was already running his Omaha Liquor Syndicate at a full clip.
Within a fifty-mile radius spread in every direction along the outskirts of the city, he had over six-hundred thousand dollars worth of booze stashed away in barn lofts, safe house basements, fruit cellars, and horse stables. On any given day of the week, his inventory included everything from New England Rum, pure grain 180-proof alcohol, Dew of Heather scotch whiskey, twenty-thousand kegs of beer, Moet champagne, Pimm’s No. 1 Cup, and Martell cognac. The operations of providing a product one couldn’t find listed in a phone directory was nothing new to Tom and he approached prohibition as pragmatically as he did his gambling joints and whorehouses: as a business, not a crime.

Numerous roadhouses and camping sites set along the braided banks of the Platte River produced the bulk of his alcohol, boiling up pot liquor in tar-black stills and redwood vats from a mash of sugar, yeast, corn and cold water. After the distillation process was complete and the alcohol condensed from steam back into a liquid through copper worm pipes, it was doctored up with juniper oil, prune juice, caramel, or creosote--depending on the spirits needed--and smuggled into the city along the shallow Platte in canoes and fan boats. Rotgut whiskey was corked into dimpled Haig & Haig bottles and sold as the genuine article. Cut vodka was made palatable with banana juices and honey and grenadine. Fake labels advertising brand names of Chickencock, Gordon’s, and Golden Wedding were pasted onto glass pints that really contained diluted monkey rum and panther’s breath.

In the city itself, creativity was used to evade the authorities. Store owners licensed to sell communion and kosher wines for sacramental purposes also sold Jamaican Rum, imported sherry, cases of champagne, and Red Star gin from their back rooms. Doctors wrote prescriptions for liquor at the price of two dollars a piece. Cigar stores and wholesale groceries advertised Shabbona Tonic as a cereal beverage for table use, White Bock near beer, and malt syrup for
home brewing. Speakeasies with names like The Sevens, The Lion’s Den, and The Coolidge Cooler, spawned underground like hibernating beetles dug into the soil.

By the winter of 1925, as a gelid chill swept over the plains and winterized the city in blue snow and jeweled fog, more than ninety such basement establishments filled to capacity every night. There were eight-piece jazz bands, bar counters cluttered with jugs of pickled eggs and stands of mixer straws, cocktail shakers rattling ice, silver trays balanced with dry martinis, men in tan bowlers guzzling down beer steins, and the newest accessory to the club scene--women. No longer was the fashion that of pale skin and a robust physique accentuated by the mold of a whalebone corset. In its place was glass hair and tangerine ears, cloche hats, bare arms, silk garters holstering hip flasks, curled eyelashes, and skirts above the knees. To meet the demand of their newest clientele, bartenders experimented with saccharine drink recipes as bamboo cocktails, apricot brandy, pumpkin gin, and fruit juices of all voltages became common staples of their trade.

Even as the nightlife was forced underground and required a password or a secret knock to gain entrance, there was little subterfuge in the Dennison-owned speaks or in any of the other enterprises of his liquor syndicate--a direct point of interest for Lawrence Sandall and his prosecution team as the first day of witness testimony in the “Rum Trial” began on October 12, 1932. In an attempt to recall that frigid winter of 1925 seven years prior, government consul called David Beazell--a special prohibition agent who supervised the wire-tapping operations during the federal investigation--to the stand.

Standing six-foot-three and tipping the scales at two hundred and twenty pounds, Beazell was a pillar of a man with a head as big as a schoolhouse globe that he crammed into a moonstone gray trilby hat. His suit, a warmer shade of pearl, was as wrinkled as an overcast sky.
As he began his testimony to the packed courtroom, the newsreel cameramen in the balcony rolled their 16mm film, hand-cranking the spring wind motors. Tom sat motionless in his spindle-back chair next to his attorney who was busy trying to rub a spot of brown mustard off his jacket lapel--he’d had a plate of fried eggs for breakfast that he always took with an ample dousing of hot Dijon.

The first few minutes of Beazell’s responses to attorney Sandall’s questions established that he had been an undercover prohibition agent working for district attorney Irving Stahlmaster since 1924. Later, once the federal government officially began their conspiracy probe, he was appointed the lead supervisor of the wire-tapping operations in their investigation. After Beazell’s credentials were taken into the court record, Sandall wasted no time in cutting to the meat of his inquiry--a meeting with Tom Dennison that took place on March 6, 1925, in the basement of Billy Nesselhous’s Owl Eyes billiards parlor. Prior to taking the stand that morning, Beazell had refreshed his memory from a memorandum he wrote following that meeting which was now in the possession of the U.S. attorney’s office. Sandall, waving an authorized copy of that note in the air, asked, “When did you write this?” so loudly he was nearly shouting.

“Mr. Sandall,” Judge Woodrough admonished, “It is not necessary to holler at the witness in that way.”

“I beg the court’s pardon, I merely wanted to make myself heard,” Sandall replied. “Mr. Beazell, this memorandum was written by you following a meeting you had with Thomas Dennison in the basement of the Owl Eyes cigar shop located at 315 South Fifteenth Street, correct?”

“Yes sir.”
“A location whose phone number that, among others, you later tapped as part of the federal investigation in this case?”

“That’s right.”

“And just so we are perfectly clear to the court, when you first discovered this location you were working only as a general prohibition agent?”

“Yes. I came straight out from Washington after taking my oath,” Beazell paused and corrected himself. “Silver Springs, Maryland, actually. Back then the agency was a unit of the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Then in ’27 it became part of the Department of the Treasury, which was when I was trained in the art of lawful interception.”

“Telephone tapping?” Sandall asked, reinforcing the colloquial term for the jury.

“Yes. I’ve been a wire-tapping expert for the prohibition enforcement service for three and one half years.”

“And where did you obtain the numbers and terminals you monitored over that period of time?”

“From the repair desk at the telephone company headquarters.”

“That would be the Northwestern Bell Telephone company?”

“Yes.”

“And your motivation to tap the phone number at this particular location was originally necessitated by the conversation you had with Mr. Dennison under the guise that you were a bootlegger hoping to purchase liquor from his syndicate?”

“That’s correct. At the time I was working undercover and had gotten in with a man who was employed by Mr. Nesselhous. That was how the introduction was made.”

“And this man, he was a bootlegger himself?”
“Yes. Jack Norton was his name, but everyone called him ‘Blue’. He operated a couple of stills outside of the city limits and I’d been working with him for nearly a year prior to my meeting with Mr. Dennison.”

Sandall looked up from the memorandum note, removed his pin joint frame spectacles, and sauntered his way over to the jury box. “And so that the gentlemen of the jury and the rest of this court may be informed about the content of that conversation, would you please recount for us, aware that your memory has been recently refreshed as to the details of that meeting, what exactly transpired between you and Mr. Dennison on the afternoon of March 6, 1925?”

* * *

It was two-thirty in the afternoon, a pearly sunlight bouncing off the old patches of snow from the latest winter dumping, the basement itself nearly as cold as the weather outside. It was a large space with concrete flooring, cinderblock walls, booths for taking wagers on the horse races, a few desks set up with ticker machines, and green chalkboards that tallied the day’s race records. A crowd of nearly thirty men were standing in line all the way up the stairs and into the main level of the cigar store as they waited to place their bets. As Beazell followed Jack Norton into the basement, he could still see his breath despite being indoors.

Tom was seated on a long iron bench at the far end of the room next to Billy Nesselhous and John McCulloch—the distiller of the once famous Green River Whiskey company. Five years earlier, once prohibition took effect for the whole country, Tom had called John up on the phone and asked him if he felt like a move from Kentucky to Omaha might be in the cards. The
government had stripped him of his livelihood and Tom needed a man who could oversee his largest still: a three-story operation cloaked by the façade of the Farrell Syrup Company.

“Goddamn misers,” John had said into the phone that day. “The Billy Sundays and Carrie Nations of this country are going to bankrupt us all.”

“Putting a lot of honest folks outta work, that’s for certain,” Tom had replied, cradling the phone stand in his lap. “But maybe you ain’t gotta lose yours.”

“I ain’t so keen on relocating,” John replied over the line.

“Well, looks you’re gonna have to one way or the other. It’s either here or Appalachia and I pay a whole lot better than them mountains will.”

“So my life of crime begins, eh?”

Tom pressed the receiver closer to his ear. “Gentleman brewer one day, federal criminal the next. That’s the law for you, fickle as a schoolgirl’s crush.”

“Ain’t never made no whiskey from corn before.”

“Well, that’s something you’re going have to get used to as well, because that’s about all we got up here,” Tom said as they finished their conversation.

Three days later John arrived in Omaha on the overnight train to become the city’s primary producer of contraband whiskey. He cooked up the best home malt one could distill with only a week between batches and three floors of thump kegs constructed inside a warehouse that proclaimed to bottle the best log cabin syrup in the Midwest.

As Beazell continued to describe the meeting that occurred in the billiard hall basement to the courtroom, at the behest of attorney Sandall, he listed the names of the three men sitting on the bench: William Nesselhous, John McCulloch, and Tom Dennison. Tom and Billy were both engrossed in their separate copies of the World Herald’s morning edition while John, a man with
ears big enough to support a sand pail for a hat, was flicking empty pistachio shells onto the floor after emptying them of their meat. With a cheek full of Beechnut and a brass spittoon at his feet, Tom glanced up from his newsprint as Jack and Beazell approached.

“Say fellas,” Jack said, nodding at their papers. “What’s the scuttlebutt?”

Tom folded his newspaper after licking his thumb. “A whole lotta hooey. Just keeping up to snuff on the Gotham Society gossip and spring fashions.”

“I hear President Coolidge was inaugurated over the radio,” Jack added. “Technology these days, huh?”

“And what a ten-cent ceremony it was for him and his dime bank economy,” Tom replied and sized up the large man standing next to Jack. “Who’s this, now?”

Jack pointed his thumb. “This here is Dave Beazell. Works with me over at the Waverly site. Pretty good with the spoon, he is.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Dave said with a deep, wooden voice and extended his hand that all three men--Tom, Nesselhous, and McCulloch--took turns shaking.

“Alright now, Dave. You’re a good-sized ol’ boy,” Tom said.

“He’s a regular Jack-the-Giant-Killer,” Nesselhous added as he returned his attention to the sporting section of The Herald.

“Yes, Jack,” Tom played off Billy’s pun. “Speaking of, I heard you had a spot of trouble with some Sarpy boys last night.”

“Heard he killed two of ‘em,” McCulloch said.

“And still came up twelve cases short for his delivery to Bernam’s this morning,” Nesselhous said with a distant tone as he snapped over the next page of his paper.
“It wasn’t nothing like how you say,” Jack defended himself, inching back on his heels. He was a naturally skittish man with a mousy face and a voice as squeaky as a set of heating pipes. “Ran into a few coppers was all. Had to make a quick drop and some bottles got broken. It was pennies compared to what could’ve happened.”

Tom reopened his newspaper to the daily crossword puzzle and held it up like a framed picture so Jack could see it. “What’s a four-letter word for Goof?”

Jack looked down at his shoe tops. With a nervous laugh that sounded more like a whistle through the gap in his front teeth, he said, “Heee, it ain’t like that, boss. We was being cautious was all.”

“I’d rather have you tell me you lost it down a well,” Tom replied and sat all the way back against the concrete wall, waiting for a response but received none. The line of men waiting to stuff their dollars in the pari-mutuel betting machines was still snaking around the length of the room and up the staircase. A man in a plastic green visor was scribbling chalk marks on the giant racing board. As Tom moved the tobacco in his lip from one cheek to the other with his tongue, he once again focused his gray eyes on the giant stranger Jack had brought with him into his basement. After a moment, he pressed his shell rim spectacles up against his nose and said, “What was your name again, fella?”

“This here is Dave,” Jack answered for him, completely unaware the man who’d been working with him for the past eleven months was an undercover prohibition agent. “And he’s got some cash burning a hole in his trousers.”

“Bet on a few of the ponies and that might cool it off for ya,” Tom said.

“I gave up horses for Lent,” Dave said.
Tom laughed. “And what did you give up to the Lord, Jack? Besides nearly fifty bottles of my best champagne, I mean.”

Jack cleared his throat. “I’ll make that up to you, like I said. But reason I come here is something else.”

Tom tilted his head, waiting.

“Young man here, McCulloch,” Jack asked and nodded at Tom’s distiller who was shaking a handful of pistachios in a cupped palm. “Is he straight card?”

“Straight enough to bend your neck for ya,” McCulloch blurted.

“He’s the backslapping sort,” Tom said with a chuckle and gave McCulloch a playful whack between his shoulder blades. “But he’s sitting right here. Why don’t you ask him?”

Jack looked back at Beazell who was maintaining a statuesque pose, hands clamped in front of his groin, his arms thick enough to stretch his suit sleeves. “C’mon, Tom. Tell my boy Dave here that this Mick is all right.”

This time McCulloch didn’t respond to Jack’s impropriety. He simply spit on the floor already littered with shells.

“In what way?” Tom asked.

“In being reliable.”

Tom shook his head. “I wouldn’t vouch for any man besides myself. You never know what another might do.”

Beazell stepped forward two paces. “I’ll be honest with you, Mr. Dennison. I want to buy some alcohol. I want your blessing. But I also want a fair price.”
“Yes, he’s all right in that way,” Tom said and leaned over to aim a wad of brown spit into the spittoon on the floor, pressing his tie against his shirt with a flattened hand so as not to accidentally stain it. “He sometimes cooks up a nice blend for us.”

“Glad to know I got your vote of confidence,” McCulloch said to Tom.

Beazell nodded. “And I want you to know I plan on selling outside of the city. I’m not here to step on anyone’s toes.”

“That’s a good idea,” Tom said. “But you if you’re going into business for yourself, you better be careful of Samardick.”

“Who’s that?” Beazell asked, though he was fully aware of the man whom Tom had just mentioned--Godfrey Samardick, another federal prohibition agent brought in from Washington to work under the direction of the district attorney.

“Just some off-his-nut pro-he with a big conscious and a tiny pocketbook,” Tom said. “He’s been making a stink in a lot of the rural areas.”

“He stays out of Omaha?” Beazell asked.

“Sure he does, but so will you,” Tom said and nudged Nesselhous with his elbow. “Every once in a while I let him and his boys smash up a few of my barrels to keep them happy. There are fifteen-hundred prohibition agents in this country and every one of them makes less than two grand a year. I could triple all their salaries and give ‘em each a Cadillac for Christmas just to call in sick when I want them to and still make a goddamn good profit. That’s the government for you. When a pro-he comes into one of my speaks, they come in for a drink. But you, they’ll be hot to bust you. Which makes me wonder. Why in the world does a fella with your kinda size want to waste his time selling a bunch of cut-rate paint out in the fucking sticks? That’s going to
be a tough racket. I tell ya, I got some idiots around town I’ve been meaning to beat the living hell out of if that’s something you’re interested in.”

McCulloch let out a snorting laugh.

“Shut your trap, Cully,” Tom said with a smile, “or I’ll cutchyer-damn-head-off.”

“I’ve some experience with that. But you do the work of a thug, you make a bandit’s wage,” Beazell said.

“Suit yourself,” Tom replied. “I guess it’s nothing but the floral wallpaper for you, huh?”

Beazell touched the brim of his hat in gratitude. “I appreciate your time.”

“Sure,” Tom said and shook his hand. “Come back anytime. I trust you and Mr. McCulloch here can work out the details on your own.”

* * *

As Agent Beazell finished recounting his first meeting with Tom Dennison to the court, reciting some of the remembered dialogue verbatim from the copy of his memorandum, attorney Sandall asked him if the Owl Eyes cigar store was the first line he tapped as part of the federal investigation.

“It was,” Beazell responded as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on the rail of the witness box. “We tapped line MA 5055 on November 25, 1930. It lead to an extension wire for a room on the second floor as well.”

“A separate phone line for the same location?” Sandall asked.

“That’s correct.”

“And what other lines did you tap in the month of November, 1930?”
Beazell began to recite the addresses and place names he recommitted to memory earlier that morning in preparation for his testimony, saying, “A few other cigar stores. The N&W on M Street, leading an extension wire to Apartment D at Clowery Court. Frank Calamia’s Palace cigar store, number AT 6193. I set up a listening net to hear all conversations that took place in a room on the second floor of another apartment on South Twenty-Fourth Street. I forget the exact address. We also used recording machines which kept a record of all numbers dialed on the phone under observation at Dennison’s Dodge Hotel office—”

“Objection, your honor,” Baker interrupted and stood up so quickly he nearly stepped out of his canvas sneakers. He’d been digging frantically through a large stack of papers and books on his defense table while Beazell spouted off his list of addresses and phone numbers, scrambling to find the correct documents in time.

As Baker shuffled to the front of the courtroom, Judge Woodrough let out a theatrical sigh. Getting through ten minutes of prosecution testimony without an interruption from Tom’s lawyer was about as likely as witnessing a lightning bolt in a snowstorm. The World Herald, in its usual wise-cracking approach to the daily coverage of the case, would come to refer to such frequent objections by the defense as “Baker’s Daily Dozen”.

With his spectacles crooked on his shiny nose, Baker—reading from an obscure passage deep inside the middle pages of a large, plum-covered law book—pleaded, “This evidence is not admissible on account of the recent Supreme Court decision that the third-party monitoring of telephone records and conversations acquired by electrical tap may be applied only to interstate and international phone calls. But these tappings conducted by agent Beazell and his staff all occurred solely in the state of Nebraska, thus making them null and void here in this chamber. Furthermore, because of this decision, such tappings violate the contract of the telephone
company with its subscribers and also violate amendments five, six, and fourteen to the constitution.”

Judge Woodrough put a hand to his head as if trying to subdue the onset of a sudden headache. “Mr. Baker, may I remind you that your client is on trial for violation of another one of those amendments, the eighteenth. This is a federal trial, not a state one. And because these are federal charges, the federal law will be applied to its proceedings, including the Supreme Court decision on telephone tapping. Your objection is overruled.”

So the wire taps--the second largest piece of legal scaffolding for the prosecution apart from the testimony of former Omaha police officer Harry Buford--were admitted as evidence into the trial. They would also produce the second biggest divulgence in the case besides the linking of the murder of George Lapidus to Dennison’s liquor conspiracy: transcripts which told of his direct involvement in the importation of illegal spirits across the Canadian border. More specifically, they would illustrate the means in which he transported his liquor into the states: a fleet of dinghies, skiffs, and motorboats sawing through the moonlit fog of the Detroit River by summer and six-cylinder Packards with gutted backseats tobogganing across the same mile-wide, frozen sluiceway by winter; daily shipments of which were established the year after the date in question during Beazell’s testimony--1926--through a meeting that took place in Michigan with a young Italian from Brooklyn who had just become Chicago’s newest crime boss: Alphonse Capone.
On day ten of the Rum Trial--October 24, 1932--Harry Buford was called to the witness box for the first day of his examination by the prosecution. Anticipation of this star testimony had reached a fervor pitch throughout the city. In every soda shop and church pew and grocery aisle, word spread about how the old boss was being sold down the river by his old driver. A newspaper headline in the morning *World Herald* declared: “Government ‘Ace’ Witness to Tell of Violent Conspiracy”. Theatrics were expected to turn the courtroom into a playhouse stage in the coming days and the corridors were filled with an excess of sixty members of the press hoping to gain entry to the trial.

Tom arrived at the courthouse fifteen minutes early and spent every second in the defense conference room seated in a swivel chair behind a frosted glass door, filling the room with blue smoke from his calabash pipe he tamped down with his thumb. His lawyer Baker outlined what he thought was going to be the prosecution’s strategy for the day, but Tom paid his words little attention. Staring out the window, he seemed as removed from the present moment as a man whittling away a whole afternoon by flicking pennies into an empty milk bottle from a porch swing.

As court came to order, Tom’s disposition remained distant and aloof, his hands folded in his lap, his eyes closed as if fast asleep. Government attorney Lawrence Sandall, dressed in a suit of hounds-tooth brown with a white knit tie and his hair slicked with rose oil, began his line of questioning by asking Buford in what capacity he worked for Mr. Dennison. After establishing their relationship--that of passenger and chauffer--Sandall changed gears and asked him how
Tom came to know Dr. Jack Broomfield. A pert stenographer with heavy green eye shadow and a finger wave hairstyle captured every word into a chording machine with her fingers moving across the shorthand keys as quickly as if playing the Chopin Waltz in C Sharp Minor.

Sandall, bandy-legged and fidgety, stomped around the entire length of the court well as he fired off his questions, moving about from the court reporter’s desk to the mahogany railing of the jury box and back again without stopping. His circled his hands in the air while he spoke, occasionally holding them steady as if to examine the shine of his fingernails under the subdued court lighting. As a lawyer, he was known for his filibuster speeches and repetitive rhetoric as much as he was for his roundabout examinations that seemingly veered off-course only to circulate back around to an initial point made so long beforehand that many in the audience had forgotten where he began. In the papers, he was jokingly referred to as “The Bread-Crumb Lawyer”.

For more than twenty minutes, as the hour approached ten o’clock, Buford retold the details of Tom’s first meeting with Dr. Broomfield at The Midway in North Omaha. He described the summer heat and how he knew the doctor as they lived on the same block, as well as bits of conversation he remembered from that day.

“Broomfield,” Buford said in a gravely voice, “was all in a dither when we first came into his office. Something about some newspaper article concerning a lynching down in Texas.”

“In Texas?” Sandall asked. “Why was an Omaha man concerned about Texas?”

“Not rightly sure. He was upset because a couple boys down there got lynched.”

“A couple boys? You mean colored men?”

“They were. And, like I said, the newspaper coverage wasn’t but a speck of print and Mr. Dennison, he said maybe it was good thing that there wasn’t a lot of ink on it.”
“Why was that?”

“He said it was the kind of thing that could catch on, you know, spread about if the idea got its hooks into people’s minds.”

Sandall paused and rocked back on his heels. “In other words, Mr. Dennison was fearful that something similar might happen in Omaha?”

“Yes. On that day he was.”

“But nearly four years after Dennison and Broomfield first made each other’s acquaintance it did happen in Omaha. On the night of September 28, 1919, William Brown was lynched in front of this very courthouse. And you were present at the time of Mr. Brown’s arrest under charges of assault, were you not?”

Tom’s lawyer, Benjamin Baker, shot up from his chair. “Objection, your honor. This entire line of questioning is immaterial. What do the events concerning William Brown have to do with a liquor conspiracy?”

“You shall see in a few short minutes,” Sandall snapped.

“Overruled,” Judge Woodrough said. “But I do advise government consul to put a point on this soon. Neither I nor this jury will have much tolerance for a scenic route examination.”

“Of course, your honor,” Sandall said and stepped forward to the witness box. “You can answer the question, Mr. Buford. Were you present at the time of the arrest of William Brown?”

“I was.”

“And where did this arrest take place?”

“In Mr. Dennison’s office. The Dodge Hotel.”

“And was Tom Dennison present in his office when William Brown was taken into custody?”
“Yessir. Myself and Joe Potach made the arrest under his direction.”

“Objection!” Sandall barked again. “Your honor, are these Mr. Buford’s words or Lawrence Sandall’s? Every word uttered here reeks of a coached report.”

“Overruled. Nothing Mr. Buford has said rings of such an accusation. The court will hear his testimony and I would advise that we hear it without further interruption,” the judge ordered and gestured at attorney Sandall.

Sandall resumed his pacing of the court well. “Mr. Buford, can you tell the court why Mr. Dennison wanted William Brown arrested?”

Buford paused before responding. “Well sir, he was concerned about his safety. Broomfield and Tom, they were good pals. Pals until nearly the end. And Willie Brown, he was Broomfield’s nephew. But that wasn’t the real reason. It all was much deeper than that. Mr. Dennison wanted to stir up some badness. He wanted to prove that the new mayor couldn’t handle crime in the city.”

As Buford’s last sentence echoed through the courtroom, Tom opened his eyes and sat forward in his chair.

“So, Mr. Buford, to your point, you are admitting that the arrest of William Brown, the siege of the courthouse where he was being jailed, and his brutal lynching the following day was a plot hatched by Tom Dennison as a political move to discredit the current city administration, chiefly that of then-mayor Parsons Smith?”

“Yes,” Buford replied. “It was a ruse to take the back the city. I overheard it so myself that very day we arrested Willie.”

“Your honor,” Baker said, stood from his chair in a flourish and lumbered to the front of the room. “I would like to pose a question to the court. How is that the events surrounding the
lynching of a man that occurred thirteen years ago, thirteen years,” he said, repeating the time to give it stress, “has any bearing on a trial where the defendant stands accused only with federal charges from an investigation that began two years ago?”

Judge Woodrough, exhausted by Baker’s continual interruptions, frowned down at him from his chair. “Either you wish to field a formal objection or you do not. But I will not stand for your grandstanding without cause and the delaying of this trial.”

“Oh.” Baker smiled and began to rattle off his complaints without pausing to take a breath. “I do have an objection. I got six of them. But you will have to excuse me for asking what a lynching has to do with the current charges for violation of the liquor law. And not once since Mr. Buford took the stand has government consul asked a single question that has to do with those charges. This is a spread eagle tactic he hopes will inflame the jury. If given the chance, the prosecution would like to sandwich in every crime since the dawn of man and pin it on my client. Every crime except the one he’s accused of. What about the Great War or the tornado of 1913? Perhaps it would be fitting to spend the rest of the day musing about how Mr. Dennison was able to concoct those catastrophes?”

The court murmured, a rising but muffled hum of whispers.

“Mr. Baker!” the judge hollered but Baker continued to speak over him.

“None of this testimony has any place in this courtroom and I won’t stand for it. If you feel fit to hold me in contempt because it infuriates me to sit here and listen to it, then help yourself to the order. I’d rather go to jail myself than stand by as this man’s only line of defense,” Baker shouted, pointing back at Tom, “and let this slander, this whole pasting of a decades-old crime, fly off the cuff without a leash. Hell, I’d rather you disbar me and let me pack
my bags back home for Bismarck than stand for one more flippant moment of Mr. Sandall’s political propaganda.”

Judge Woodrough pounded his gavel repeatedly, finally silencing the room. “Mr. Baker, you are skating on thin ice. Let me remind you that you do not rule this court.”

“No, sir, your honor. That is your charge. Mine is to defend my client and I aim to adhere to my responsibility even if you cannot perform your own!”

“I want to see both consuls at my bench,” the judge demanded as Baker and Sandall stepped forward. With a hushed voice, the judge addressed both men. “Mr. Baker, I appreciate your fervor for your client. But if you could’ve let off the gas for a mere moment, you would’ve seen that I’m in your favor in this regard. Your objection would’ve been sustained. But your behavior is not. If I have to endure one more unruly outburst from you for the remainder of this trial, I will have you held in contempt, even at your own request. Don’t you ever challenge me in my own court ever again. Is that understood?”

“Yes, your honor. I apologize for my recklessness.”

“Good,” the judge replied and turned to Sandall. “Now, as for you, I already warned you once about bringing this testimony to a head. I would like to have this trial over before the new year. So I’m giving you one last opportunity to put a stamp on what you are getting at, Mr. Sandall, and it better have something to do with liquor.”

“Of course, your honor. It won’t take more than five additional minutes if only I am allowed to arrive there. My questioning is not without direction.”

“All right, then,” the judge said and Sandall resumed his examination of Buford, petting at his knit tie.
“Mr. Buford, did you ever directly hear in conversation Mr. Dennison’s motives for the arrest of William Brown?”

“Yes, sir. I did.”

“And, to the best of your ability, would you share with this court what you remember, as closely as you can, what those motivations were?”

Baker rose from his chair again, but spoke his words with a careful restraint. “Objection, your honor. The witness cannot recount with any measure of certainty the exactness of any supposed conversation that took place nearly thirteen years ago.”

“Overruled. Memory will be called upon again and again during this trial to serve as testimony. But the jury will note that such testimony is recalled from a long distance. Nevertheless, with that in mind, the court will hear Mr. Buford’s response.”

Sandall nodded at his witness, prompting him to speak.

“Well, like I said before,” Buford said, “he wanted to create a ruckus. Mr. Dennison, that is. And I do remember it clear enough. He told Dr. Broomfield that very day in his office the only way to get Smith and his boys out of city hall was to show they couldn’t handle crime. In fact, he wanted crime to get worse than it already was.”

“And,” Sandall added. “Since the court has advised me to get the core of this matter, do tell me, Mr. Buford, what does any of this--the arrest of William Brown, the political motivations, the want for a spike in crime across the city--what do these things have to do with liquor?”

“Well, sir, liquor was illegal even way back then.”
“Prohibition became state law in 1917, to be more exact,” Sandall added. “So, at the time of William Brown’s arrest and the horrifying lynching that followed, liquor had been illegal in Nebraska for nearly two years already.”

“That’s right. And Tom, he made more money on liquor because it was illegal. Three times as much as when it wasn’t. But without control of the city, without the mayor and the police and such on his half, he couldn’t operate his stills and saloons without getting interfered with.”

“And you heard this rationale from Mr. Dennison’s own mouth?”

“Yes sir. And more than once, too. He talked about it often.”

Sandall’s face colored and his smile widened as he snorted loudly to clear his sinuses.

“So it would be accurate to say that such a spectacle, the spectacle of a headline-grabbing crime that ended in the destruction of a municipal building, this very building,” Sandall said and looked all about the room, “and took a man’s life was profitable for Dennison’s bootlegging business, would it not?”

“That was the way of it.”

“Objection,” Baker said. “Attorney Sandall is drawing a conclusion not held in evidence. Furthermore, this witness’s testimony is circumstantial at best and misremembered at worst, and I would ask that such speculative deductions be wiped from the court record.”

The judge sighed. “Mr. Baker, I have already ruled that testimony as to past conversations either engaged in or overheard by any witness in conjunction with the charges for violation of the Volstead Act will be heard by this court. And Mr. Buford is testifying to such conversations. Your request is overruled and if it is Mr. Buford’s memory you wish to challenge, you will be allowed to do so during your cross-examination. But when it comes to flawed
memory, sir, I would ask you repair your own. I don’t want to have to remind you again about rules already set forth by this court with your continual objections to the contrary.”

Baker sat back down in his chair, scrapping the wooden legs against the tile.

Sandall chuckled at his opposition’s childish fit and, with his attentions turned to the jury, said, “Mr. Baker calls my theories on conspiracy ‘astounding’, that is to say, he deems them grandiose and far-reaching. Yet, by definition, this is exactly what a conspiracy is. And these are the charges, that of a liquor conspiracy headed by Thomas Dennison. More so, what you have just heard from Mr. Buford describes not what the defense would insist to be a ‘fabricated architectural web’. Rather, it is simple linear thought. It is neither hard to follow or understand. What Mr. Buford has just testified to is such a conspiracy. And, to reiterate, let me lay out the plot points for you again. In order for Dennison to regain his political stranglehold over the municipal government and get the reformers out of office, he needed to prove the then-current administration could not relieve crime in the city. So he did what any criminal would do, and that was to order more of it. Make no mistake, political control was exactly what Mr. Dennison needed to protect his illegal liquor operations. And how did he ensure such control? Through crime. All of this, every violent, ghastly piece of it, when you peel back the curtain, boiled down to liquor. So if defense consul asks you again what the events surrounding the brutal lynching of William Brown has to do with this trial, your answer is a simple one. Liquor. The illegal manufacture and sale of liquor and the freedom to conduct such an operation without fear of the law. But now you see and will continue to see that the law is exactly what Mr. Dennison should fear.”

* * *

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In the summer of 1926, when Tom Dennison first met him, Al Capone was twenty-seven years old and still relatively unknown outside of Chicago. His anonymity beyond the Windy City was precisely what Capone was relying upon to evade the law that summer. He’d been residing in a cabin on the shore of Round Lake in Lansing, Michigan, since that past April when three rival bootleggers and an assistant state’s attorney, William McSwiggin, were slaughtered in a ten-second burst of machine gun fire outside of the Pony Inn in Cicero.

Police photographs documented the mess: four fedoras listless on the sidewalk, blood smeared on the concrete like slashed black paint, the bodies mangled and full of holes next to a stack of empty avocado crates. The following morning Al Capone, known only speculatively in the papers up that point as Al Brown, was halfway to Michigan with four of his muscle men, six flapper girls, his brother Ralph, and two Jacks--his financial advisor Jack “Greasy Thumb” Guzik and Jack “Machine Gun” McGurn, leaving his wife Mae and his son Albert behind at their Chicago home on South Prairie Avenue.

Through his relationship with Boss Pendergast of Kansas City, Tom’s initial meeting with Capone was set for the Fourth of July holiday weekend. Together, Dennison, Pendergast, William Nesselhous, and two of Pendergast’s accountants took a Great Western Railway car to Elizabeth, Illinois, just outside of Chicago. They were greeted by two of Capone’s bodyguards and his number one henchmen, Frank Nitti. From the stick-style, rural depot they were driven around the horn of Lake Michigan. Motoring through Indiana in a pair of identical, powder-blue Lincolns with curtained back windows, they passed whitewashed farmhouses and windmills with tannins washed out of the wood. The four-hour trip to Capone’s summer hideout passed largely in silence and a soup of cigar smoke.
Upon arrival at the cabin, Tom parted the curtain from his backseat window. Four more automobiles were in the gravel drive, chief among them being Capone’s personal armored green Cadillac sedan with bulletproof glass--a seven-ton monster that weighed as much as an Asian elephant. The cabin itself, a two-story brown brick affair, rested on a 200-acre plot on the southeast side of the lake. A stone gun tower shaped like a castle turret on the side lawn guarded the cabin, occupied by two lookout men in sharp gabardine suits who cradled their Thompson machine guns like infants. Out on the water, sailboats cut across the turquoise surface of the lake, tiny white triangles outlined by a slate sky. A heavy population of Blue Spruce and Hemlocks, filled with yakking chickadees and nuthatches, shaded the acreage in all directions.

After exiting the Lincolns, the five men--Tom, Nesselhous, Pendergast and his two accountants--were lead into the kitchen. Seated around a circular table were four more men playing stud poker and sipping colorless anisette from tiny stemmed glasses. They bantered back and forth with each other in Italian, turning their heads as Tom and his men entered the room but not rising from their chairs. Guests were common at the cabin and new group arrived nearly every day to discuss business with the man who’d taken over Johnny Torrio’s Chicago syndicate. The girls who made the trip for the summer getaway were lounging in the adjacent sitting room on chintz parlor furniture, wearing rayon stockings, boyish haircuts, and expressions of boredom on their faces. The entire kitchen reeked of garlic and cigarette smoke.

Standing over the stovetop was Capone himself, his back turned as he sautéed pine nuts in a skillet, simmered “Sunday Gravy” in a giant pot, and pan-fried beef in preparation to make his favorite dish, Braciola--a recipe he learned from his mother. Tom and his four associates silently spread out in the kitchen, hats in hand, waiting for an introduction as Capone continued to labor over the gas range.
His shirt tails were untucked, his suspender straps hung off his trousers like cut parachute cords, and a pink apron was tied around his waist. Unlike the caricatured images of the man that would later become part of his celebrity status--that of a hulking figure dressed to the nines with a vanilla-white Borcelino fedora slanted atop his bulbous head, a poplin trench coat draped over his shoulders, and known to wear nothing but sea silk underwear--the Al Capone who stood sweating over his simmering pot of sauce was still relatively thin and his neck hair was in need of a good trim. Though he was cooking in his socks and a pastel pink apron, he was anything but the domestic version of a man in a cottage home: a pair of silver-chromed revolvers were tucked into his shoulder holsters and the trademark knife scars on his left cheek were visible despite his considerable effort to hide them with facial powder.

As he stirred the sauce with a wooden spoon, completely engrossed by his culinary tasks, Frank Nitti let out a cough and Al turned to face his guests.

He smiled and wiped his caked hands on his apron front. “Well, I’ll be, our friends from the corn states have finally arrived.”

“Gentlemen,” Nitti--ever the master of formalities in his gray suit, polished mustache and checkered tie--said, “introductions are in order. Mr. Capone, this is Mr. Dennison from Omaha, his associate Mr. Nesselhous, and from Kansas City, Mr. Pendergast, Adam Walton and Owen McGrubery.”

The men took turns exchanging handshakes and Al asked if they were hungry. “I hope you fellas brought your appetites with yas. I’m making Bracolia, a recipe that has been in mia famiglia per tre generazioni,” he said with a rusty, Brooklyn-Italian accent.

“Smells lovely,” Tom said. “We’d be honored to stay for dinner.”
“Good, good. And maybe after that a lil’ vino, a lil’ hooch, the good stuff, then we’ll go down to the lake and watch the fireworks. We put on the best show up here. Even outclass the folks at Ebbet’s Field. But first, right down to business,” Capone replied and turned his attention to the men playing poker at the table.

They were still gabbing loudly in Italian, the sounds of a petty argument that drowned out the broadcast from the five-tube radio where Grantland Rice was interviewing Babe Ruth. Capone tipped the fedora off the man closest to him and scolded, “You fucking sbruffones could give a woodpecker a headache. Here am I sweating over the pot trying to listen to what’s going on in the world and all yous can yak about is cards.”

All four men looked up at their boss.

“C’mon, off with yas. We got business to discuss. And take the accountants and pencil-pushers with ya. The girls out in the parlor are getting lonesome. Have ‘em show our guests’ boys a good time,” Capone added as his men gathered up their mess of cards and loose cash from the table. They escorted Nesselhous and Pendergast’s two advisors out into the parlor and up the winding staircase to the second-floor bedrooms. The club girls trailed behind them with melting highballs in their hands, disinterested as a group of children being taken out to shop for school supplies.

After they were gone, Tom, Pendergast, Capone, and Frank Nitti took up the chairs around the table. Also remaining in the kitchen were Machine Gun McGurn and Al’s brother Ralph, who sat up along the breakfast counter with their hands clamped in their laps. As the lone cabin housekeeper served the men coffee in mismatched cups, Al crammed a gigantic cigar in his cheek, uncorked a bottle of cherry brandy, and poured a dash into his mug. He offered the bottle around the table and each man helped himself to a hearty pour besides Tom.
Capone crossed his left leg at the knee, a feminine posture that didn’t match the bulk of his beefy thighs. He hadn’t bothered to take off his pink cooking apron. “Ain’t ya thirsty, Mister D?”

“I never touch the stuff,” Tom said graciously.

“Well howsa fella supposed to sell a product he don’t use himself?”

Tom screwed a grin on his face. “Would you be asking me that question if I worked behind the counter of a lingerie shop?”

Capone let out a belly laugh. “Boy, you sure are nutty. That’s a good ol’ poke in the ribs, eh Frankie?” he said and nudged Nitti with his elbow. “Imagine that, ol’ Mister D here, ol’ grandpa wolf, walking around in a pair of frilly step-ins to show ‘em off for the customers. What about you there, T.J.? You wear woman’s undies?”

Pendergast patted his ample stomach. “I got on a corset right now. Reason how I got such a tiny waistline.”

“What a crackup.” Capone laughed again. “You two are a couple a doozies. The two Toms. Tom one and Tom two. Pendergast here, he and Torrio go way back. You, you was always a laughier. So, Mister D, what’s your pleasure?”

“Call me Tom,” Dennison said. “And a glass of water would be just fine.”

“Cazzata, you didn’t come all the way up here to be my guest and ask for a glass of water. What about cream soda? You like cream soda? Tell ya what, we keep the icebox stocked to the brim with the stuff. All these Jews I got surrounding me?” Capone said, his tone still jocular. “They suck it down like breast milk.”

“That’d be swell,” Tom said and the housemaid brought forth a golden bottle of Canfield’s Swiss Crème brewed exclusively in Chicago as well as a paper box tied with ribbon.
Inside were a dozen pasticciottis—Italian cream puffs. Capone helped himself to two of the sweets, popping the first in his mouth whole. A spot of lemon custard filling squeezed out onto his lips and he licked it off with one fluid swipe of his tongue.

“I appreciate you fellas coming all the ways up here to see me. It ain’t Chicago, molte scuse,” Capone said apologetically, opening his arms and shoving the pastry box to the center of the table. “But I think we can have a grand old time, even if it is Michigan. First, though, we get the business out of the way so we can enjoy ourselves tonight,” he continued and hunched forward to put both of his elbows on the wood. “So, you boys are looking to buy a lil’ alkyhaul, are yas?”

“So long as you’re looking to expand,” Tom replied.

“I ain’t looking to unload any excess product if that’s what you mean. I can hardly meet the demand in my own wards as it is. Prohibition, huh? What a cramp.”

“It beats abstinence,” Tom interjected.

“Sure it does. And I got an alternative depending on how much you need. Everywhere east of the Mississippi is flush from the Atlantic and the Caribbean. But us Midwest boys? We gonna go through Canada.”

“Shipping across the lake?” Tom asked in disbelief.

“Naw. Across the river,” Capone replied and licked the sugary coating off every digit of his right hand in quick succession. “In Detroit. I know some fellas there can get us as much brew as we want direct. And only the real stuff.”

“I didn’t know we came all this way to talk to a middle man,” Pendergast said.

“Aww, hush up, T.J.,” Capone said and waved him off. “It makes sense. These fellas, the Bernstein brothers, they’re the closet valve we got to the import trade. I known ‘em since way
back. A couple of their cousins used to do some yegg work with me when I was running around with the Rippers in Manhattan. That is, if you’re getting sick of cooking up your own swill from potatoes and corn.”

“The Purples?” Pendergast asked doubtfully, referring to the infamous and brutal Purple Gang of Detroit.

“Fucking finocchios,” McGurn added from his seat at the breakfast counter and spit into his empty coffee mug.

Al turned and waved off the slur. “You’ll have to forgive Jack. He’s aces with a Tommy, but he’s not so good with the Italian. Still, he tries.”

“The Bernsteins are unpredictable,” Nitti said. “But in this racket there’s never any guarantee on anything.”

“Tengo na minchia tanta,” Capone interrupted and held out both of his hands, palms straight up in the air, measuring a distance of a foot between them. “I’ve got a dick this big, eh? Detroit’s full of a bunch of puttanas. But they don’t have the balls to fuck with me. In my heart, I hate ‘em. But I don’t make decisions with my heart.”

“Either way, I’m buying from you,” Tom said. “Not from Detroit. If Detroit’s where you get your alcohol, that’s your end of the deal, not mine.”

Capone leaned back in his chair and ignited the cigar he’d been wetting in his lip. Puffing it up to a full glow and brushing crumbs off his apron, he said, “There ain’t no bridges on the river, but there ain’t no law, neither. So we ferry it over in the summer and take it by truck load over the ice in winter. Clean as a baby’s bottom, it’ll be.”

“I’m looking for a hundred cases a week, for starters,” Tom said, holding his bottle of cream soda without taking a sip.
Capone titled his head. “That’s alotta hooch. What? You got eight-year-olds drinking the shine? I never knew old Omey-haa was such a thirsty place.”

“Town’s got more taverns per capita than any other city in the country,” Nitti added dutifully.

“He’s my brain,” Capone said and nodded at Frank.

“Make it two-hundred for me,” Pendergast added.

“He’s got six-year-olds drinking in his city,” Tom joked.

“Hey, however yous want to make your dough, but we do cash up front for the first load,” Capone said. “You pay the first half now as a sign of assurance, the other half upon delivery.”

Tom took a long, fat envelope out of his jacket and slid it across the table. Al picked it up and weighed it in his hands without opening the flap.

“We haven’t discussed price yet,” Capone said.

“That’s seventy-thousand. More than enough for the whole first shipment in advance. But I want more than just Canadian Club. The extra cake’s to make sure I get some variety.”

“I’m the squarest crook that ever lived,” Capone replied with a smile and handed the envelope to Nitti who peeked in at the bills.

“I trust you for it,” Tom said. “But if I end up regretting it then trust me, I certainly wouldn’t want to be in your shoes if I have to come looking for you.”

Capone reared back in his chair. “Assolutamente, you can’t live your life always worrying you’re going to get a machine gun in your face. That takes a toll on a man.”

“Sure doesn’t seem to have gotten to you yet,” Tom replied.
“Yes, but not even a year on the job and already I’m out here in the willows doing my own cooking. Still, I keep a jolly disposition,” Capone said and looked to Frank. “What was it they called me in the Tribune?”

“Gangster Allegro,” Nitti replied in Italian.

“That’s right. The Merry Gangster. That’s because I’m always smiling. But you can get a lot farther with a smile and a gun that you can get with just a smile.”

“We have a deal then,” Tom said and extended his hand. Capone paused, then met his grip. Upstairs, the moaning of the vacation girls and the creaking of headboards hitting against the wall were audible through the ceiling.

Pendergast swallowed his fourth pasticciotti since the box had been opened, wiped off his moustache with a napkin, and wagged his eyebrows. “Well then, I think I might go upstairs and work up an appetite before supper,” he said, stood, shook Capone’s hand, and waddled his way towards the staircase.

Tom began to stand from the table as well, but Capone grabbed him softly around his sleeve cuff to keep him in the kitchen until Pendergast had left.

“Let’s take a stroll,” Capone said. “There’s something else I wanted to discuss with you in private.”

Tom nodded and followed him down the long slope of the yard to the lakefront where cattails grew out of the tall grass and orange mud was combed flat on the bank. A trio of white-necked wood ducks glided along in the shallows. Sloops and single-mast catboats from the Round Lake sailing club were further out, so still on the water they appeared painted against the sky. Capone finally untied his apron from his neck and let it hang down from his waist like a
skirt. He played compulsively with a handful of loose peppermints in his left trouser pocket while Tom stared out the water, arms crossed.

“Listen,” Capone said, rotating his cigar in his mouth, “You’re the berries for coming up all this way and I want you to know I value the effort.”

“That you said already,” Tom replied.

“There’s something more that needs to be put on the table. Call it a favor that will get our business relationship started off on the right foot.”

“Money’s not enough?”

“I wanna make dough as much as the next fella, but if money was the only factor in deciding who I did and didn’t do business with, I’d be the biggest sucker in Chicago. I ain’t the smartest guy in the world and I never did cotton much to school. I punched my sixth grade teacher square in the kisser one day and never went back. But I’ve learned a thing or two that you’ll never get to know from a chalkboard.”

“Such as?”

Capone lifted up his left shoe to examine the sole and saw a slight coating of mud on his heel that he wiped off on the grass. “There’s worse fellas than me in the world, but some men you just can’t talk to. There’s no reasoning with ‘em. This bit of trouble I’m in now? A couple of north side swindlers you might know hiding out in your neck of the woods?”


“Somehow they got it in their heads they could hijack my whiskey and I wouldn’t do nothing about it.”

“There’s criminals and then there’s crooks.”
“Bugs Moran’s boys. They ain’t nuthin’ but a couple of run-of-the-mill hoods. Boys spent too much time getting all chesty in my suburbs and they found out all that chest can get your jaw blown off. But a couple-a-months back, they come at me with ten cars and a thousand bullets up in a coffee shop right in the middle of the goddamn day and still couldn’t hit the mark. Just sloppy. But when three of ‘em got it back, they just happened to be prowling around with a state’s attorney.”

“I saw it in the papers.”

“Bad luck for me,” Capone said without a trace of self-pity.

“This ain’t a bad place to lie low.”

“Yeah, but you can’t run a city when you’re two states away. So I’m turning myself in at the end of the month.”

Tom raised an eyebrow and opened his green tie. “To the law?”

“Ahh, them cops love me. They’re scared of me, too. Bugs Moran ain’t. But he will be. So before I do, I need to clean up the loose ends.”

“You need me to clean them up for you, you mean,” Tom said, knowing exactly where the two men from Bugs Moran’s gang had been staying since their attempted hit on Capone in the coffee shop: room 216 at the Dodge Hotel, his hotel.

“Hey,” Capone replied, “my wife might do my laundry, but I’ve always handled my own business. I want you to take Frank and Jack back with you to Omey-haa. Show ‘em around town, buy ‘em a steak dinner, let ‘em smell a cooch, and then maybe after that you show ‘em to a particular hotel where you got some Chicago fellas paying for the deluxe suite. They’ll take care of the rest.”

“Those Chicago fellas are paying me for protection,” Tom said.
“And you’re paying me for booze.”

“It’s a hell of a favor.”

Reaching into his coat pocket, Capone took the envelope of cash Tom had given him at the kitchen table and held it out in the air.

Tom didn’t reach for it. “So that’s it, huh? The deal’s off?”

“The deal’s on,” Capone said and forced the envelope into Tom’s hands. “You do this thing for me and your first shipment comes courtesy of Chicago.”

* * *

Harry Buford’s testimony in the rum trial took place over three days--the longest stint on the stand by any of the government witnesses. Throughout the duration of his questioning, Deputy United States Marshall Earl Young stood on the judge’s dais, looking over the whole room with a 12-gauge, pump-action Winchester cradled against his belly. During Buford’s second day on the stand--Wednesday, October 25, 1932--his testimony was brought to a climax when Sandall turned his questioning to Dennison’s relationship with Al Capone.

By that time, in the short seven years since Tom first met him at his lake cottage, Capone had become the most notorious man in America. That past May, he was sentenced to eleven years in prison after being found guilty of income tax invasion and was currently residing at the Atlanta Penitentiary. His legend--largely that of the torrential patter of the Tommy Gun and the Saint Valentines Day Massacre--was cemented in the nation’s psyche. Gangster films like “Little Caesar” and “Scarface” performed so well at the box office that one theatre in Times Square ran a showing of “The Public Enemy” twenty-four hours a day during the first week of its release.
Even the first mention of Capone’s name, before any information about his connection with Tom was revealed, sent the courthouse audience into a titter.

Judge Woodrough silenced the murmurs with a swing of his gavel. Tom was smiling--a rare sight from the defense table. Earlier that morning he’d eaten his heartiest breakfast in weeks: poached eggs with pink mayonnaise, raisin toast with almond paste, chilled honeydew, and a dish of Neapolitan to stamp it all down followed by two cups of coffee and three clove cigarettes. As he appetite returned, so did his powers of concentration. His eyes were no longer closed and the headaches that usually kept him pawing at his forehead were temporarily subdued. He wore a pair of Zylo-frame bifocals and a diamond stickpin centered in his burgundy tie. At his right, attorney Baker was scratching ink from a seven-dollar fountain pen onto a pad of legal paper. He popped his head up from his note-taking efforts at the first utterance of the celebrity gangster’s name.

“Mr. Buford,” Sandall said, weaving around the front of the courthouse in laps, bouncing from the court reporter’s cubicle to the stenographer’s desk to the jury box in short strides, pausing every so often at his examination table like a pit stop to gather up his notes or confer with his legal team. “Did you ever hear the defendant mention the name Al Capone or were you ever aware of any business conducted on behalf of Mr. Dennison with Al Capone or his Chicago syndicate?”

Buford, a russet brown suit crumpled around his thin frame and a faint moustache under his nose, sat back in his chair and stared up at the courtroom ceiling. “Sure he did. He went up to Chicago a few times. Tom loved that town. Something doing there all the time, he said. And Capone, Tom said he was a 100-percent fella.”

“How many times did Tom visit Mr. Capone?”
“Oh,” Buford said and rolled his eyes up in his head as if the number was stuck somewhere on the roof of his brain. “Four or five. Something like that.”

“And when was their relationship first established?”

“Well now, that had to be back in ’26. But he didn’t go to Chicago then. He was up somewhere in Michigan where Capone was laying low. I remember picking him up from the train station when he returned.”

“And did Mr. Dennison mention anything about his visit with Al Capone or did you ever learn any of the details of their business partnership?”

“Yes. That night, in fact,” Buford replied. “Tom was giddy just talking about it. Spilt the beans all over the place. He said that Capone had the system, that his idea was right in having a ‘Killer Squad’.”

The courtroom again erupted in a cacophony of muffled surprise and the judge banged his gavel to silence the audience. Baker was on his feet and marched three steps to the middle of the well. “I object!”

“On what grounds?”

“This witness’s reference to killings or a so-called ‘Killer Squad’ of any kind is not set forth in the indictment and therefore is inadmissible,” Baker shouted.

“Counseler,” the judge replied as the courtroom quieted. “I concur very seriously with your contention, but as I’ve made clear before from the outset of this trial, I cannot exclude testimony when a witness relates conversations he had taken part in or overheard. If such conversations go beyond conspiracy to make or sell liquor it may be necessary to admonish the jury not to consider that part of it, but for now Mr. Buford’s full testimony will be heard by this court.”
“At what price, your honor?” Baker demanded. “The damage will already be done by then to prejudice this jury.”

“No, sir. It will not. The jury is fully aware of their responsibilities and the charges at hand. Your objection is noted but overruled.”

As Baker returned to his seat, Sandall stationed himself in front of the witness box and urged Buford to continue with his reply.

“Well, like I was saying,” Buford said. “Mr. Dennison outlined for me the Capone system as he had learned it from Chicago. At the time he told me that was the only system and that was the system that should be adopted here instead of the old system.”

Sandall smiled and took two large steps towards the jury box. “And what did Mr. Dennison tell you about this new system? This ‘Killer Squad’ system you have just referred to?”

* * *

On the night Tom and Billy Nesselhous returned from their weekend trip to Capone’s Round Lake cabin, Buford picked them up from the Burlington Station shortly before midnight. After dumping their cowhide traveling bags and hat boxes into the trunk of Tom’s blue Studebaker, Buford, in the middle of his graveyard police shift, drove them to a diner on 12th Street. It was an all-hours, night-lunch joint as long and rectangular as a rail car. Inside: a curved ceiling, diamond-pattern floor tiles, beige vinyl stools along the counter. One lonely worker--both waiter and cook--hadn’t had a customer in over an hour. As the three men eased themselves onto the stools, placing their hats on the wall pegs behind them, the proprietor greeted them with a hearty, “What’ll it be, gents?”
“Say there, friend,” Tom said in a pleasant mood. “What's your special?”

The man flung a damp towel over his left shoulder and pointed to a chalkboard behind him cluttered with block lettering as straight as if it was written with the edge of a ruler. Reading what was on the board without looking, he said, “Salmon patties with egg sauce. Apple nut and celery salad with raspberry dressing.”

Tom waved off the choices. “Three steak sandwiches with the works and three coffees.”

The man nodded and produced three white mugs with matching saucers from a shelf under the counter. “Got a fresh pot on the boil right now. Won’t be a minute.”

“Whaddaya got for pie?” Tom asked.

“Apple and key lime.”

“Well, set us up with three apples, double-scoops of vanilla all around after we’re done with our sandwiches.”

Buford looked at him curiously.

“That's closed up for the night,” Tom explained after the counter man disappeared into the kitchen. He scooped five spoonfuls of powdered cream into his mug before the coffee was poured and stuffed the boat of his briar pipe with the dark contents of a twist-tie baggie. After discarding a match into a bronze ashtray, he said in an excited flurry, “I’ve been thinking about this all the way back from Michigan and we outta take a page out of Al’s book. He’s got things right and I’ve been thinking. We’ve had these fellas around here collecting money for years. They turn half of it in, but all the campaign expenses we got, they got to be paid by you and me, Bill.”

“Should we be discussing this now? Here?” Nesselhous asked.
Tom looked around the empty diner. “Ain’t a soul in here. Yeah, we’re discussing it now. We got to get on this, quick. So here is the lowdown. We have got captains to go on and we ought to make better use of them. I tell ya, these policemen are a bunch of babies. I got to carry them around in my arms,” Tom paused and smiled at Buford. “Except for you there, Harry. The rest of ‘em don’t got the foggiest.”

The proprietor emerged from the back with a fresh pot of coffee, filled all three of the mugs silently, set the pot on a warmer, and scurried off to the kitchen again as the words--steak sandwicheys be out in a few, gents--trailed behind him like a scarf tail in a stiff wind.

Tom stirred his coffee and tossed in two sugar cubes. “In order to do these things it takes money to get rid of these thieving collectors. There’s only one thing to do and Capone’s got it right. Now that we got the suds coming in from East Windsor it’s high time to put on the reigns here.”

As Buford told the courtroom of Tom’s new plans he learned from his visit with Capone over their first weekend together, he explained that it was Dennison’s intent to divide Omaha up into the North and South by Leavenworth Street. Nesselhous was to handle the South and Harry, admitting his own involvement to the court, was placed in charge of the North.

“We’re going to simplify things,” Tom had said that night at the diner, continuing his diatribe as he forked up mouthful after mouthful of the open-faced steak sandwich in between his words, the bread soggy with blood. He was eating and talking so fast he barely had time to take a nasally breath in between syllables. “This way the money comes into two hands and then back to camp. It will be the nuts. Protection will be sold on the gallon. A dollar per sounds about right. Then we get rid of these collectors who’ve been holding out.”

“Get rid of?” Nesselhous asked.
“Put a price on their heads,” Tom replied, waving his fork in the air. “Boys have been siphoning off the top for too long.”

Nesselhous wiped his mouth by lifting his napkin off his pant leg. “Don’t you want to think about this for ten minutes?”

“Them days are gone forever. I ain’t wasting any more time. And like I told you, I’ve been thinking about this the whole way back on the train. We get a few of our best handymen together, let them know the score.”

The rest of the meal passed largely in silence: the apple pie was served and followed by two more cups of coffee. Tom’s summer silk tie now bore the two spots of his meal that missed his mouth as he thumbed his pipe. Two more men in yellow raincoats entered the diner, the tips of their collapsed umbrellas clicking against the tile floor like the ends of canes as they wandered to the corner booth. It had begun raining outside, a quiet drizzle.

After paying the tab, Tom lifted his felt derby from the wall peg and lead Billy and Harry out to his Studebaker in the parking lot. His only remaining words of the night came suddenly from the backseat after they dropped Nesselhous at his house, spouting them off as if he hadn’t quit talking the whole night and was finally putting a punctuation mark on his decision. “Yeah, that Capone’s got the right dope, all right. We’ve got to hustle for our business, Harry, and we ain’t been hustling. But we’re going to now, by God. We’re going to show these collectors what’s what and when it’s all said and done, I think I might buy myself my own summer home. You, too. We’ll get you a nice cabin right next to mine on some lake filled with ducks and sailboats and everything will just be peachy. Whaddaya think about that?”

* * *
As Harry Buford finished relaying the gist of the conversation to the packed courtroom--the audience so taken in by his tale that their usual communal sounds of traded whispers had ceased altogether--attorney Sandall posed a new question to his witness:

“So, in essence,” he said, hands on his hips. “These protection fees you mentioned, they became campaign funds for Mr. Dennison’s political ticket?”

“Yes,” Harry responded. “The money coming from the bootleggers, it went right back to the government in a way. It always made me laugh.”

“So it would be fair to say that Dennison was impressed by Capone’s operations?”

“Sure. Enamored, I’d say. Some people get frantic every time they see a little bit of the world. Tom wasn’t no different.”

“And what else can you tell us about Dennison’s relationship with Al Capone?”

“Well, like I said, Tom went up to Chicago a few times after that over the next few years. He said he’d been entertained royally. Capone always put on quite the spread to my understanding. Bathtubs full of beer, society dames, that kind of thing. But before he ever went back, a couple of Capone’s men came here.”

“To Omaha?” Sandall asked, lifting his left eyebrow.

“When it came to transportation,” Buford replied, pointing his thumb at his chest. “I was the man in the know. It was two boys who drove into town the day after Tom and Billy got back from that first trip.”

Sandall scribbled a brief message on a pocketbook notepad after snapping its cover open with a flick of his wrist. “And what were their names?”

“Frank Nitti and Jack McGurn.”
On the evening of July 7, 1926, two men stepped out of the revolving door of the pink-bricked Dodge Hotel; one in a porkpie hat with a blue band, the other in a sweat-stained sports shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbow. The air was as muggy as a steam bath, the cloudy sky full of a copper luster from the dipping sun. Pausing under the hotel’s marquee, they took turns lighting Palina cigarettes from the same pack--the newest craze in tobacco, toasted with a dash of java.

Dodge Street was aglow with the first wave of the midsummer nightlife. Parked cars lined each side of the street. The Metropolitan Theatre advertised a showing of *For Heaven's Sake*. Folks dressed in evening wear walked the sidewalks, anxious for a night of dancing the Charleston and the Bunny Hop. Turning east, the two men, Ronald and Howard Applequist--known all over Chicago as the Apple Brothers and known to only a select few in Omaha--strolled down to the end of 17th Street. They entered an unnamed speakeasy beneath the Robert’s Dairy bottling plant. A set of concrete stairs with a white iron railing in an alley used for deliveries led to a basement door bearing the insignia of a gold leaf. The small windows were also painted gold. After giving the password to the doorman--“Jimmy Sent Me”--the Apple Brothers took a seat at a corner table and ordered two gins with quinine water. The speak was only at half capacity, the sun not yet having set. A small dance floor and a curtained band stand were empty at the far end of the room. A man in thick spectacles and a striped bowtie pounded out notes on a player piano.
Two hours and four rounds later, the brothers paid their tab after adding two quarts of whiskey onto the bill. The jars were placed into a paper sack by the barkeep and the brothers resurfaced into the alley to head back to the Dodge Hotel to finish the night alone in their double suite.

As they neared the end of the alley--barely wide enough to handle the girth of a single truck--two silhouetted figures appeared from around the corner. Soft moonlight illuminated their shapes: dome crown fedoras, wide shoulders, knee-length overcoats. The Apple Brothers stopped in their tracks, squinting through the darkness. Clear steam poured out of a building pipe, carrying the scent of dryer exhaust. A trashcan lid rattled to the ground. The brothers turned around to sprint to other end of the alley when a roaring Ford coupe with Illinois plates pulled in between the buildings off the street, blocking their exit. The filmy headlamps whitened their faces for a brief moment, then were switched off. The engine continued to purr, the men behind the windshield glass as dark as shadows. For the next five seconds, nothing moved--not a breath, not a sound, not a footstep.

Then the two silhouetted figures at the opposite end of the alley each lifted a heavy object from inside their coats and the hammering of gunfire began. A blitz of wasp-like bullets from the nozzles of their Thompson submachine guns pierced the air, barking out the slick as the Applequist brothers fell to the ground in a heap and the screech of tires from the Illinois coupe smoked out the pavement, never to be seen in the state again.
Louise Vinciquerra Haning--“Queen of the Omaha Bootleggers” and former longtime madam of The Berryman Club--was brought to the Rum Trial in handcuffs. Currently serving the last month of a 90-day sentence at the county jail in Fremont for an Omaha liquor charge, she was escorted into the courtroom by two officers who were young enough to be her grandsons. It was the third day of prosecution testimony--Monday, October 16--the week before “ace” witnesses Harry Buford and federal wiretappers would begin to take the stand.

Though her one piece disconcerting jewelry--a pair of steel, figure-eight handcuffs--was the article that most caught the jury’s attention, she had been allowed to dress for court from her own wardrobe: an ostrich feather boa that glittered like Christmas tinsel was draped over her shoulders, her opera pumps that clacked like hooves on the tile floor, her pillowed figure squashed into a cinnamon crepe dress. She’d powdered her face as white as new concrete and what was left of her once thick auburn hair was tucked under a synthetic wig.

After her handcuffs were unlocked and she took her seat in the witness box, she asked for a glass of water. The courtroom was as sticky as a thunderstorm trapped in a bottle and members of the audience--nearly two-thirds of which were women--sat shoulder to shoulder in the pew-length benches, fanning themselves with pamphlets and cigar coupons. Six wooden ceiling fans scrolled at a fast clip but served no ventilation. They only seemed to thicken the air as if whisking up a batter. Judge Woodrough began the day by commenting on the uncomfortable conditions and asked that the court be cleared of any person who could not find a seat. Usually,
some twenty or thirty extra persons were left standing at the rear of the room and the overflow capacity was something he deemed to be adding to the mugginess.

After the bailiffs removed the stragglers, the judge also ordered the windows to be opened halfway for much needed airflow. Outside, the faint murmurs of street-level activity four stories below--bleating car horns, shouting sidewalk vendors, the occasional streaking wail of an ambulance siren, the cathedral gong of a clock tower marking every quarter hour--gelantized into one singular noise and crept into the courtroom like muffled music coming through an apartment wall.

Attorney Sandall was sporting a fresh crew cut and a gracklehead suit he purchased the previous weekend at the newest monstrosity of urban consumerism--the renovated ten-story, thirty-elevator Brandeis and Sons department store. Four minutes into his line of questioning, he stepped close to the witness box and, in what began a series of inquiries and responses that were issued back and forth at a rapid clip, asked:  “Miss Haning, this May you were convicted of violating the Volstead Act for operating a still in Fremont County, correct?”

“I was.”

“And you are currently serving your sentence at the Fremont county jail for that violation?”

“Yes.”

“How much more time have you to serve?”

“About thirty days. It is my second offense. I was sentenced to ninety.”

“And in what manner did you first become a bootlegger?”

“I was asked to join by William Nesselhous,” Louise replied.

“To join what? Thomas Dennison’s liquor syndicate?”
“Yes. Nesselhous is Tom’s right-hand man.”

“And you’ve known Mr. Dennison for how many years now?”

“Nearly twenty-five. I ran a free-and-easy for him until it caught fire.”

“And what was the name of that business?”

“The Berryman Club.”

“Objection, your honor,” Baker sounded off but remained in his chair. “This witness’s prior employment holds no veracity to the charges pending against my client.”

The judge shifted forward behind his bench. “Mr. Baker, if you would like to address this court, you will stand when doing so.”

Baker stood and was about to repeat his objection when Woodrough continued:

“Your objection is sustained. The last question and answer will be stricken from the record.”

Sandall paused a moment before he resumed his examination and wiggled his squat, rabbit-shaped nose as if catching drift of an unfamiliar scent. With his chin pressed against throat as he scanned his notes, he began to hurl out his questions again like blind fire from a trench hole. “Miss Haning, when were you approached by Mr. Nesselhous about joining the syndicate?”

“That would be March of 1927.”

“And was anyone else present when he gave you that invitation?”

“Yes,” Louise paused and looked over at the defense table. “Mr. Dennison was there, too. But I wouldn’t call it an invitation. It was an ultimatum.”

“An ultimatum?” Sandall said curiously as if he was rehearsing a scene with an actress who’d fumbled her lines. “Well, we’ll get to that shortly. First, where did this meeting occur?”

“At the Cleve Building.”
The Cleve Building--standing six stories tall and skirted with dock canopies above its entire first floor--sat in the middle of Jobbers Canyon, a seven-block district of warehouses nestled between Jackson and Farnam Streets. Nearly every structure was of equal height--six to seven stories--and constructed of red brick above red-bricked streets, an arrangement so congested and uniformly colored that the entire congregation resembled an artificial canyon, hence the name of the district. Manufacturing every kind of product from industrial fabrics to farming vehicles to tinware and dry goods and even steam bakeries, the twenty-four warehouses in Jobbers Canyon had all been erected in one mass sneeze during the architectural frenzy of the first decade of the century.

The brick streetscapes of the district, cut through with railroad spur lines, were bustling at all hours of the day. Dock workers loaded crates into fleets of tan-painted delivery trucks. The Kellogg Company poured nearly ten-thousand pounds of toasted flakes and bran oats down metal chutes everyday. Tractors and mowers were assembled on conveyer belts, taking a page out of Henry Ford’s Detroit factories. Slaughterhouse meat was trucked in iced boxes to the train depots were it was shipped across the country in refrigerator cars. The first two floors of the Cleve Building, which proclaimed to manufacture paperboard for milk and egg cartons, cloaked a whiskey still with painted windows, its stench hidden by the stronger, rotten aroma of the paper emissions exhausted on the top four stories.

In the spring of 1927, Louise was in her first year of operating that still when six uniformed officers charged into the warehouse. After shooting open the padlock on the stable
doors, the policemen rushed into the building with their shotguns drawn. They fanned out around the first floor and secured the other two exits to ensure none of the twenty workers on duty could flee the scene.

Six-hundred-gallon pot stills were boiling up starches and birch bark. Over two hundred cases of bottled whiskey, stamped with forged brand names on their box sides, rested in rows along the eastern wall. Some were draped with heavy blankets as part of a stockpile, others were being made ready to ship. Fifty-pound feedbags of corn and sugar were stacked up like a river levee next to drums of embalming fluid stolen from funeral homes, the entire operation dimmer than a dark room.

After the police cordoned the first level, a navy blue Studebaker with whitewall tires pulled up to the dock. Tom and Billy Nesselhous stepped out of the backseat and strolled into the building without umbrellas despite the spring thunderstorm. The entire city had been scrubbed clean over the weekend where all but four hours were filled with sheeted rainfall. Walking into the middle of the still where Louise was standing with her arms crossed next to one of the policemen--Joe Potach--Tom and Billy both removed their hats. Tom shook the excess water off his brim with a quick shake and ran an Irish linen handkerchief over the crown.

Smiling widely and glancing about at the modest size of the operation, he said, “How’s you, baby?”

Louise shrugged her shoulders. “My name is Louise. Not baby.”

“What?” Tom opened his hands, palms up. “All this time we’ve known each other and I can’t show you a little affection?”

“I’d rather you’d show me respect.”

“What’s got you all bollixed up?”

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“What is this?” Louise and stepped two paces closer to Tom and Billy. “Another one of your shakedowns?”

“Ain’t nothing like that. Everything’s as dandy as can be.”

“It’s not enough you run me out of my best working house with the girls, but now you got to come stampeding in here with your goons?”

“I’m glad to see you landed on your feet after all this time. This is a nice-sized operation. But I suppose I had nothing to do with that. You want respect? How about a little gratitude, first?”

“Gratitude for what? Putting me out of a posh house that I built into one of the finest palaces in the Midwest in exchange for factory work?”

Tom slipped a cigarette out of his gold case and packed it against the cover. “Oh, come on with that. All that trick furniture and pink toilet paper in there? It was bound to catch fire one day.”

“Cut the comedy,” Louise snapped. “I’m sick of this place. Every night I go home stinking of pulp and mash.”

Nesselhous laughed. “From queen whore to factory girl. Either way, you never was much of a wedding bell prospect.”

“Aww, screw, Billy,” Tom said. “There’s no need for insults.”

“You two are worse than a pair of birdhouse yaps,” Louise replied.

“Look, Auntie,” Tom said and rotated his hat in his hands by the brim. “You’ve been out of whoring for a while now and you ain’t getting back in. Now, I know you’re more suited for the gay set life. All tea wagons and cake boxes and bedsprings. Well, that’s over for you. But
you’ve been doing all right with the hooch. So if you want to keep doing all right, you’ve got to buy from the company from now on or you can’t work in Omaha. Catch on?”

“And what if I refuse?” Louise said firmly.

Tom paused to looked around the still again. His police officers were all as stiff as cedar as they guarded the exits and the brewers were standing around with their hands on their hips, waiting to either resume their work or be arrested. Officer Joe Potach--a newly minted Captain--was working a big cud of gum in his mouth and leaning against a support pillar next to Louise, the only policeman without his gun drawn. Tom wiped his nose with the same handkerchief he used to dry off his fedora.

“Well,” he said, sniffing. “I’d hate to make things hot for you. We made it so hot for one man he had to quit.”

“The price is two-hundred dollars a month for protection,” Nesselhous added.

“Protection from who?” Louise asked.

“The law,” Tom replied.

“You mean you.”

Tom grinned. “You will buy your sugar and yeast from us, too. But all prices are fixed. There’s no inflation, which is a nice guarantee.”

“I’ll never make any profit with those costs.”

“If you make enough sauce, you’ll make more than enough dough,” Tom said.

“Call it a motivation to produce,” Nesselhous added sharply.

“Or else what?”

“Or else these boys,” Tom said and gestured at Officer Potach and two of his nearby men, “will have to make this place one of their weekly visits. Theatre on Fridays, family dinner on
Saturdays, church on Sundays, your pal Bernie Bashman’s on Tuesdays, and then you somewhere in between. But you already know about ol’ Bernie, don’t you? Man used to walk around town like he’d just stepped out of a bandbox and now he’s got to buy his tires on credit down at Blubaugh Brothers. I wouldn’t want that happening to you.” Tom reached out to take Louise’s left hand and held it as if preparing to give it a kiss. Three of her fingers adorned with garish rings. “Considering you went tramp all long time ago.”

Louise yanked her hand away. “I ought to take the first tub out of this country.”

Tom dropped his cigarette to floor. “And go where? Back to Sicily?”

“Your prices are too high. This is a boutique operation.”

Nesselhous sneered. “We’re giving you the boutique rate.”

“And we keep the math simple,” Tom said. “So should you. If a cigar is worth five cents and you’re still selling it for five cents…”

“Meaning what?” Louise asked after a moment.

Tom chuckled. “All those years of percentaging your whores to death and now you need me to dig you up a lot of economics?”

Louise crossed her arms and pursed her painted lips.

“Here,” Tom said and took a roll of bills out of his trousers. The wad was so thick he pulled his pocket lining inside out. After removing the rubber band and counting the money flat, he glanced at the packaged crates of whiskey that were stacked up as neat as cord wood along the eastern wall of warehouse. He handed Louise the entire sum, nearly fifteen thousand dollars. “There are benefits to doing things the easy way. I’ll buy every bottle you have here now.”

Louise kept her arms crossed.
Tom raised the handful of money higher, close enough he could tickle her chin with the bills. “You can use the change to buy some liver for your cat.”

“Fuck you,” Louise snapped.

“Can you beat it?” Nesselhous said. “You offer a dame a mortgage’s worth of clams and it’s out with the expletives.”

“Yeah,” Tom replied and crammed the money back into his pocket. “Some people just never have brains enough to join the winning side of things.”

“I was on that side, remember? But somebody went and burned it to the ground.”

“Buildings sometimes catch fire,” Tom said with a roll of his shoulders. “It’s one of those hard facts of life. But some places are more combustible than others. Take this place, for example. I hear you have to proof your liquor with gunpowder.”


Louise turned to clomp back towards her small office at the rear of the warehouse. As she walked away, she said, “When you boys leave make sure to close the gate behind you.”

* * *

Five years later, back at the courthouse, as she finished recounting her meeting with Dennison and Nesselhous to the court, Louise mopped her brow and gulped from a glass of water resting on the small table next to the witness stand. Attorney Sandall pressed her on the notion that she was forced into an ultimatum to join the syndicate by asking: “Did Dennison say anything else about the supposed advantages of buying directly from his outfit?”
Louise sat up straight in her wooden chair and folded her hands in her lap. “He said if I got my liquor from the company that the city sheriff would never raid me. If I didn’t buy from them, they said they would see I was raided on a weekly basis.”

“And what was your response to Mr. Dennison’s offer?”

“I turned him down flat,” Louise said. “I was only a retailer and there was no way I could make a profit with their rates.”

“Were there any repercussions to your choice?”

“I came here in handcuffs didn’t I?”

“I’m not referring to your federal troubles which you are currently serving time for. I mean were you ever put at a loss for not buying from Dennison’s company?”

“I was raided six times over the next forty days by the city police.”

“Were you ever arrested by the city police?”

“Yes. Once by the city and once by the Feds. After my city arrest I had no other choice but to agree to join up with Tom and Billy. They said I had a choice. Either I could make my own liquor and sell it to the company or I could buy my liquor from the company and sell it on my own, which was the same thing.”

Sandall nodded. “And you were told you would be protected against the government, too?”

“Yes.”

“But it wasn’t true?”

“It seems not.”

“And for how long did you make liquor for Dennison’s company?”
“For four years, off and on,” Louise said and, as she finished her reply, the courtroom stirred as Tom, sitting weakly at the defense table with his head resting on his hand, collapsed out of his chair. Falling sideways out of his seat, he smacked his head hard on the floor. The sound of the thud spurred half of the courtroom to their feet, gawking and whispering. Baker hustled around the other end of the table, knelt down next to his client and called out for a doctor. Two uniformed officers also came to Tom’s aid. Within half a minute the entire room was in a panic, a huddle of people surrounding Tom. He was unconscious and Dr. Sachs, a spectator in the audience, checked his vitals. With the assistance of Baker and the two officers, he lifted Tom to a sitting position as he opened his eyes following the momentary blackout. A small cut bloomed on his forehead where it impacted with the tile. Baker loosened Tom’s tie and unbuttoned his collar to give him some air. Judge Woodrough asked the bailiffs to clear the room and call for an ambulance.

“Mr. Dennison,” Dr. Sachs said, “can you hear my voice?”

Tom closed his eyes slowly, then reopened them. “Yes. Can I have some water?”

Baker poured him a glass from the table and held it to his lips. Sipping tentatively, Tom put his hand to the cut on his head.

“What happened?” Tom asked.

“You fell out of your chair,” the doctor said. “What is the last thing you remember?”

“Falling out of my chair,” Tom said dryly.

Baker laughed quietly. “How are you feeling now?”

“Embarrassed as hell.”

Doctor Sachs touched Tom on the shoulder. “Describe for me your condition. How is your vision? Are you feeling any pain?”
Tom shook his head. “I just got a little dizzy. I’d like to lay down for a bit if I could.”

“Are you sure you’re well enough to stand?” the doctor asked.

Tom nodded and swallowed. “I believe so. Give me a hand, would you?”

Slowly, Dr. Sachs, Baker, and the two officers helped Tom to his feet, his knees unsteady. With both of his arms over the shoulders of the two officers, Tom was assisted into Judge Woodrough’s chambers and laid onto a couch at the rear of his office. The doctor helped him out of his suit coat and covered him in a blanket, as he was shaken with chills and told him he feared pneumonia in his weakened state. Both attorney Sandall and Judge Woodrough joined them in the office after the courtroom was emptied. The judge removed his gown and hung it up in his closet. Sandall paced the room, ignited a cigarette. Now in his shirtsleeves, the judge inserted himself behind his desk, poured himself a cup of tepid tea from a sterling silver kettle and dropped in two sugar cubes with a pair of matching tongs.

“Considering it’s a Friday,” Woodrough said. “I think it best to postpone court for the rest of the day. The weekend recess will allow Mr. Dennison time to recuperate and be given a full medical checkup.”

Baker walked over to the front of the judge’s desk. “At the outset of this trial I asked for a continuance due to my client’s documented medical condition, which you ignored. He’s suffered two strokes this past year already and the kind of daily stress incurred from these proceedings is not something he can endure. He’s not even healthy enough to sit in a chair under his own power. And given what’s just occurred I’d ask you reconsider my request.”

“Nonsense,” Sandall snapped, standing next to Baker. “Every time the man coughs into his hanky you are asking for the same thing.”
Woodrough reclined back in his seat. “I’m not about to make such a decision at the present moment. First, I’d ask that Mr. Dennison be evaluated again at Saint John’s hospital. After I’ve read a report by the doctors there, not just by his own physician, then and only then will I reconsider my previous ruling.”

Baker fumed. “The man just collapsed from loss of consciousness. What more proof do you need? Maybe after he’s in a coma?”

“It was quite the spectacle at that,” Sandall said before the judge could respond. “A spectacle that I suspect to be the work of theatrics more than anything else.”

“That’s right,” Baker said. “All his actor’s training over the years has finally paid off. Have you lost your mind? The man’s bleeding from the head.”

“Gentlemen,” Woodrough interrupted. “Let’s not do this, shall we? My decision is final. Mr. Dennison will be given the weekend. After that, we will take the advice of actual medical professionals. I want you both back here at seven sharp Monday morning with your reports. Until then, since no one in this room is both a doctor and a lawyer, let’s not make diagnoses or accusations, how about?”

Both Sandall and Baker stood silently with their arms crossed.

“That is all, gentlemen,” the judge said to shoo them away. “Good day to you.”

* * *

Later that night, in the bedroom of his Gold Coast home, Tom was sitting up against the headboard of his sleigh bed and surrounded by five people: his physician Roscoe Arnold—son of the recently deceased Doctor Greg Arnold who’d been Sue’s caregiver, his lawyer Benjamin
Baker still dressed in his court suit, his daughter Francis and her two young children--Christopher and Sonya. The bedroom he and Sue Anne had shared for so many years was largely unchanged from the day of their marriage and could be described only as overstuffed--populated with horsehair and tapestry chairs, a giant cedar chest, Persian velvet rugs, a large Venetian mirror, a pair of needlepoint stools, hurricane swing lamps with braided georgette shades that threw a maple gold light across the entire room.

Dressed in a set of maroon pajamas over his union suit, a blue bed cap, and carpet slippers, Tom coughed into his handkerchief and spit flam into a thundermug on the floor. A pair of reading glasses were propped on his forehead. He held a book--The Boy’s Story of Lindbergh by Richard Beamish--in his lap. He’d been hacking his way though the pages for his grandchildren who were both sitting on the edge of the bed in their longies listening to their nightly bedtime story. A rack of briar pipes rested on the gateleg nightstand next to a small brass vaporizer with an oil can spout that blew a constant herbal steam into the air like a boiling kettle.

Doctor Arnold, a short and stooped young man in a tattersall vest who took after his departed father both in appearance and profession, pressed the cold bell of his stethoscope against Tom’s chest and asked for five deep breaths. He’d given Tom a series of tests over the past hour and finally took Tom’s temperature with a glass thermometer--ninety-nine degrees, nothing to be overly concerned about. Then, removing the stethoscope buds from his ears and packing up the rest of his instruments in his Gladstone bag, Arnold stood from his chair and said, “The good news is there are no signs you had another stroke.”

“What then?” Tom asked. “I just fainted?”

“Probably the result of stress. How is your energy level?”

“If I licked a stamp it’d still be in my mouth tomorrow,” Tom said.
“Exhaustion could have been our culprit, then, too. Have you been experiencing any nausea or abdominal discomfort?”

“None,” Tom said and pulled the eiderdown up to his chest.

“Still, I’d recommend a light diet over the next couple of days. Nothing too heavy or starchy. I’d also recommend plenty of bed rest over the weekend.”

“Can he be back in court on Monday?” Tom’s lawyer asked, standing at the foot of the bed with his scuffed briefcase in hand.

“Always the concerned mother, this one,” Tom said to his attorney.

Doctor Arnold loosened his tie. “Well, let’s see how he feels on Sunday. I’ll come back that evening to do another checkup. Also, I’d like to be given a court pass for the remainder of the trial in case he has another episode.”

“Trial’s open to the public. Every mother goose in Douglas County is there at eight o’clock sharp waiting for a seat.”

“I mean a chair at the defense table.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Baker said. “It might even soften up a couple of the jurors.”

The doctor then doffed his felt hat which was in serious need of reblocking, bid his farewell to everyone in the room, and instructed Tom’s daughter, Francis, to call him immediately if there was any change in her father’s condition. After he was gone, Francis took Christopher and Soyna out of the bedroom once they each gave Grandpa Tom a hug and kiss goodnight. Tom patted them on their heads, promised they’d pick up their bedtime story of aerial heroics tomorrow night, and reminded them to brush their teeth. As his grandchildren scampered
off, Francis touched Baker on his elbow and said, “Please, no shop talk tonight. Dad needs his
rest.”

“I’m only here for support,” Baker replied and pulled one of the needlepoint stools next
to the bed after the room had cleared. He shut the bedroom door and sat down, placing his
briefcase on his lap. He finally had his client to himself. “That was some show today. Couldn’t
you have waited to blackout until next week when the big dogs take the stand?”
On the same day as Tom’s seventy-fourth birthday--October 26, 1932--Harry Buford’s testimony in the Rum Trial came to an end with all the grandiose melodrama of a penny dreadful serial novel.

Following the lunch recess, Buford was turned over to the defense for cross-examination at two o’clock. It was his third straight day on the stand. The rigorous hours of interrogation were visible on his worn face and in his hoarse voice. The courtroom audience was just as weary: women fighting to keep their eyes open beneath the brims of their picture hats, men sweating through the same shirts they had taken to the seven-cent wash at Capitol Laundry instead of eating lunch so they could be back in time to regain their seats. Tom had guzzled three cups of coffee and ate two slices of orange cake for his midday meal just to give him energy enough to focus through the rest of the afternoon and carry onto to his planned birthday dinner later that night at the Flatiron Hotel. As court reconvened and Buford was once again sworn into the box wearing a pearl gray suit with big lapels, Benjamin Baker at last had his chance with the government’s star witness.

Paging through a loose sheaf of notes and adjusting the fit of his octagon spectacles, Baker started from the beginning: “Mr. Buford, in all the time you have known Mr. Dennison, what was the chief task you performed for him?”

“I was his driver,” Buford said so softly he was barely heard.

“Could you speak up, sir?”

“I was his driver,” he replied with greater volume.
“And who do you drive for now?”
“I drive my own car now. No one else’s.”
“And what kind of car is that?”
Buford hesitated and wiped his mouth. “A Packard.”
“More specifically, a 1930 Packard Roadster?”
“Yes sir.”
“An automobile valued at three and a half thousand dollars. Odd. In your final year as an Omaha police sergeant, you made a salary of nine thousand dollars.”
“I paid for it myself, if that’s what you’re implying,” Buford said. “My salary was three times more than the price of that damn Packard.”
“Have you ever given Dennison a ride in that particular car?”
“The first year I bought it I drove my old friends around. Sure, I took Tom a few places in that vehicle.”
“So Tom Dennison was your friend?”
“I just said he was,” Buford snapped. “Is a broken friendship a crime?”
“Depends on the manner in which it’s broken,” Baker said with a tight-lipped smile.
“Was your friendship with Tom how you happened to be on the police force?”
“No sir.”
“Did you take instructions from him?”
“Sure,” Buford said. “Turn left at this corner. Keep going straight past the stop sign, that kind of thing.”

The courtroom audience let out its first communal laugh in a week.
“Very playful, Mr. Buford,” Baker said and couldn’t help but to grin himself as he sauntered over to the jury box. “That’s a good one. I think this whole chamber needed a good laugh to help get us through the day. But considering you are here as a government witness testifying against the man who employed you for so many years and whom you called a friend for so many years that you all of a sudden decided to sell down the river, let’s skip the funny stuff and tell this court why you broke from Dennison in the first place. That is, to save your own hide with the promise of immunity from the prosecution.”

“That’s incorrect,” Buford replied, his courtroom diction polished through hours of rehearsal in the district attorney’s office. “I agreed to testify before any such promises were made.”

“I see. So government counsel over here,” Baker said, pointing at the four men sitting at the prosecution table, “offered you that free pass after the fact out of the goodness of their own hearts?”

Another ripple of laughter rode through the audience from the front row to the loiters standing at the back of the room.

“I had settled it my mind, I mean,” Buford said matter-of-factly.

“Oh? What sold you? It come to you in a dream, did it?”

Buford paused and looked over at the defense table for the first time all day, making eye contact with Tom. “I made my decision on the day that Dennison told me he’d give me a thousand dollars plus my expenses to get behind that Jew George Lapidus and follow him to Chicago to bump him off.”

Despite attorney Sandall’s opening statement, which had already informed the court of such a crime at the start of the trial, the spectators in the audience were rendered silent and
stunned by Buford’s admittance. Finally, the accusation of an order to murder George Lapidus had been voiced by someone other than a lawyer. Even more surprising was that the information had not arrived with the prosecution’s examination, but with Baker firing off the questions.

After a moment he turned and threw out his own barb to the court which drew the loudest howling of the entire trial: “Well, the cat’s out of the bag now, isn’t it?”

From laughter to gasping to laughing again: the once-tired audience was getting their thrills’ worth out of the free drama that afternoon.

“Since we’re on the subject,” Baker said, earning once last chortle before his emotions flipped for the third time in so many minutes. “Let’s dive right into it. When and why did Mr. Dennison offer you that sum of money to murder to George Lapidus?”

Buford paused, his eyes swirling as if tracing his memory in a loop. “Well, it was two weeks after the raids on his largest still that he first told me that Lapidus was putting his nose into his business and running to Washington to oust Rowan Samardick from his position as the deputy prohibition officer in the city.”

“And that was all it took for my client to order a death warrant?”

“No,” Buford said. “There’s mountains more if you’d let me finish.”

“Please,” Baker said, opening his arm to the court. “Take all the time you need. And be sure to leave no stone unturned.”

The court murmured. Was Baker defending Dennison or prosecuting him?

“You see,” Buford started in on what would be the longest uninterrupted divulgence of his entire testimony with Baker lounging back by his defense table and eventually sitting on the wood. “Samardick didn’t interfere with Tom’s syndicate. I suppose he was paid for turning the blind eye or maybe he just kept ‘em closed out of fear. Either way, Tom controlled him and
Lapidus wanted someone else, a man by the name of Roscoe Rawley, to come over from Washington to take his place. And Tom told me he couldn’t put the reins on Rawley. It would mean his ruination, he said. Lapidus was behind the Howard street raids through District Attorney Stahlmaster. Tom said we had to stop him before he went any further. Lapidus and Stahlmaster were interfering with the organization and causing trouble continually. He also said Lapidus was the ring leader and that he led Stahlmaster around by the nose and there was only one thing to do and that was to get him out of the way. He said they had shut off gambling and other sources of revenue and that Lapidus was trying to replace Samardick and if he did that there would be nothing left, no money for the campaign fund.”

“And where did you hear all this?” Baker asked. “Over a morning cup of coffee?”

“This all occurred over a period of months. It wasn’t no secret that Tom and George’s friendship had lost its shine. But then one day Tom called me into his office and got confidential. He told me: ‘Bill and I have talked this thing over. I’ll tell you something in confidence. You owe money, don’t you?’ I told him yes, I owed plenty. So he said: ‘You have relatives in Chicago and it just so happens that one of my bird dogs came whispering in my ear that ol’ George thinks that might be a good place to drop anchor after he’s done all he can to sink me. So I’ll give you a thousand dollars now and any traveling expenses to get behind that Jew and follow him up there and bump him off.’ He said we’d fix the records at the police station to show that I was in Omaha at the time and that would establish an alibi.”

“And you declined that offer?” Baker asked as the court remained as quiet as Catholic congregation during a homily.

“Yes. I’ve done a lot of things in my life I’m not proud of. But I’ll never have to regret taking another man’s life.”
Baker recoiled, his purpose for letting Buford tell all he could manage finally readied for the curtain drop. “And you were still an active police officer at the time Dennison offered you this money?”

“I was."

“And while a police officer you committed crimes and disregarded your oath of office many times, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Buford said solemnly, hanging his head. “I did.”

“And you are under oath now?”

“Yes.”

Baker smirked. “That is all,” he said and the courtroom hit yet another high canopy of traded whispers and gasps that Judge Woodrough silenced with his gavel.

Finished with his cross-examination and seated again next to Tom, Baker wasn’t halfway into forming a smile when Lawrence Sandall bolted out of his chair like a man one-half crazy and one-half blind, a single sheet of paper in hand. For in the chess match that was the biggest federal trial the state of Nebraska had ever seen, Baker had plotted and maneuvered his pawns on the board in goading Buford to spill the beans only to later be able to call them eggs or marbles or anything else but the truth spoken by a man who had been anything and everything save a honest one for most of his life. In turn, Sandall--more parts fox than wolf--had been waiting in the damp of his lair for that very moment. Odd as it seemed to many at the time, the prosecution never once brought up the murder of George Lapidus in the previous two days of exclusive testimony from their ace witness. Sandall allowed Baker that heavy lifting all his own, dropping the bait and even letting him swim out to the deep with a long slack of line before he cranked the reel.
And the hook was this: an offering into evidence of a single typed letter addressed from Chicago to the Omaha police chief that threatened the life of George Lapidus--a letter of which Buford said he had written at Dennison’s dictation.

As Sandall approached the judge’s bench in his brown herringbone suit, he handed over the typed page and said he could produce evidence to show it was written on the same Underwood No. 5 typewriter used for all Dennison’s correspondence.

Baker leapt out of his chair again before he’d even touched his back to the wood, crying out, “Objection, your honor.” He turned to the court reporter with a wagging finger. “And make sure you get this down.”

“What could it possibly be this time, counselor?” Woodrough asked.

“The existence of such a letter, no matter its contents, was not disclosed at any point to the defense during pre-trial. Therefore, its surprise admission here violates the law of civil procedure.”

Judge Woodrough pressed his eyeglasses all the way up the bridge of his nose as he briefly scanned the page.

“We just found it in the slush pile last night, ourselves,” Sandall teased.

“Mr. Baker, as you are well aware,” Woodrough said as he shook the paper. “Certain types of information may be protected from discovery before trial. Original documents like this one here that need to be proven as original and not a duplicate or forgery--in this case an exact model of typewriter on which it was composed--fall under that category.”

“In what tribunal? Her majesty’s court of Wales?” Baker shouted and stormed to Woodrough’s bench, fists clenched at his side. What came next was spoken in a hushed tone so the rest of the court could not hear his plea. “Your honor, how am I supposed to provide a
suitable defense for my client when I am not allowed knowledge of all the elements I suppose to defend him from?”

Woodrough removed his spectacles. “It is not in my place to tell you. I’m not on your staff. But if you are feeling overwhelmed and need added legal assistance, you can file a formal request at any time.” Then, raising his voice to court level again, the judge said, “The letter will be admitted as evidence article D1 for identification. Mr. Sandall, if it pleases the prosecution, you may begin your redirect of Mr. Buford.”

As Baker began to walk back to his table, he stopped halfway and filed another exhausted protest. “Objection, your honor. I have already cross-examined this witness and the introduction of new evidence to the court would disallow any such questioning by the prosecution outside of a direct examination.”

Woodrough sighed. “Mr. Baker, you cannot object to something before it has even occurred. If the prosecution strays from any of the points raised by the witness during your examination, you may voice your opposition at that time. Until then, this letter directly pertains to the order of the murder of George Lapidus by your client in conjunction with the charges of conspiracy to violate this nation’s liquor laws, a point of contention which you posed to this court of your own volition. So I would ask you to refrain from such premature pleas and the undue delaying of this trial.”

Once again taking his seat--the crests and crescendos of the afternoon’s proceedings rising from low humor to high tension, long victory to quick defeat--Baker clamped his hands in his lap, stitched by his own yarn.

Sandall, grinning like a mule eating briars and his neck fat hanging over his stiff collar, pounced around the front of the courtroom, letter in hand. “First off, I would like to thank Mr.
Buford for his continued patience and exhaustive testimony in these proceedings. It’s been a long three days for him and I’m sure he’s just as weary as the rest of us, if not more so. Considering such, I will keep my redirect short and to the point.” Sandall paused and finally posed his first question:

“Mr. Buford, you said you typed this letter at the behest of Tom Dennison?”

Buford leaned forward. “Yes, Tom made me write that letter threatening Lapidus’ life. He wanted to put the fear of God in him. Then I sent it to Chicago to be mailed to the chief of police in Omaha.”

“Chief of police Roy Towl?”

“Yes sir.”

Sandall waved the page in the air. “Who mailed it for you from Chicago?”

“My sister-in-law. She lives there. But she didn’t know what it was about. All she did was put the stamp on the envelope.”

“Your sister-in-law? Mrs. Catherine Treyor?”

“That’s correct.”

“So you admit to typing this letter threatening Mr. Lapidus’ life?”

“Yes, but I didn’t write it. I mean, I wasn’t the author. I didn’t choose the words. I only typed it.”

“Well then,” Sandall said, fit on his reading glasses and held the paper close to his face. “So that the jury might be informed to the exact content of this letter, let me take a moment to read it to this court verbatim.”
Then, pausing to clear his throat, Sandall started: “Addressed in the top left hand corner is Chicago, Illinois. Dated November 27th, 1930. Recipient address reads to Chief of Police, Omaha, Nebraska.”

Another pause, then the direct reading: “Dear Sir, There is a little information that I have got that I think you should know. A friend of mine here who…”

* * *

“…a friend of mine here who mixes up more or less with the gang overhead the following conversation. Period. Stop. End of sentence, new paragraph,” Tom had said two years earlier on the day after Thanksgiving--November 27, 1930--as he plodded about the penthouse suite of his Dodge Hotel. It was midmorning, shafts of pale light streaming though the small openings in his floor-length curtains. Dressed in a pair of gold pajamas buttoned to the collar, he paced the room in his socked feet. What little was left of his thinning hair remained uncombed and a new wedding band marked his left ring finger.

Ten minutes earlier, his new wife Nevajo had emerged from the back bedroom and left the suite in a swirl of perfume, still wearing her evening gown and carrying her four-inch heels in hand. Last night’s annual midnight bonfire to celebrate the Irish-Omahan Thanksgiving with other Emerald Isle high-society members had been quite the gala, the close-knit after party trailing up to Tom’s penthouse. With her inky hair pulled back in a single clip, Nevajo kissed Tom on the cheek, rang the front desk for a car, and said goodbye to the other two men in the room: Billy Nesselhous and Harry Buford.
Buford was seated at a curved leg table in front of a No. 5 Underwood typewriter, striking the keys carefully and firmly. At the end of Tom’s first dictation, he advanced the page with the carriage return lever. Nesselhous was seated across the room on a stripped armchair—pants creased, ointment in his hair, a newspaper sagging in his hands as he spied over the top of the pages. In the background, a Big Six football game between Missouri and Oklahoma was being broadcast on a 12-tube RCA Victor, still scoreless in the second quarter.

“Start of the second paragraph,” Tom said as he ached around the room like a creaky piece of machinery. “It seems several months ago there was a jew from your city,” he recited and paused. “And make sure you get that word ‘jew’ in there. Every word exactly as I say it.”

“Capital or lower case?” Buford asked, taking his fingers off the keys.

“Lower case,” Tom replied, paced over to a vermeil mirror and dipped a comb into a jar of daub. In the cherry-dim glow of his desktop gas lamp, he parted his last thin swipes of hair, measuring the line from the center of his left eyebrow. “Staring again: there was a jew from your city who arranged for a still to be sent to Omaha and set up. Period. New sentence. The arrangement,” he paused again after setting down his comb and lifting his eyes to the ceiling. He was drawing up the words as if scooping them out of a pan with a ladle.

“The arrangement was if the place was raided and the still taken he would pay eight thousand dollars. Period,” Tom said and moseyed his way over to a breakfast cart place set with dishes of chilled jams, grilled slices of tomato, a carafe of grapefruit juice, and a plate of assorted rolls. He spooned up a glob of apple butter onto a toasted English muffin and was about to begin again when Nesselhous crumpled his newspaper in his lap and said, “Are you really planning to mail this letter?”

“Yeah. What of it?” Tom said with his mouth full.
“Well, I have a few concerns you might want to hear before you lick the stamp.”

“Course you do. You’re fretful of every little thing lately.”


“They the same thing. It all boils down to hesitation,” Tom replied and plopped himself on a rose pink sofa with his plated muffin. “Yeah, you’re scared all right. But that’s just the point. This is a scare letter. Your boots are supposed to be shaking.”

Nesselhous raised his newsprint to reading-level. “It ain’t my heels you’re after.”

“And you can consider that one of your many blessings,” Tom said and took a few deep breaths. “Now looky here, Bill. I know you two kikes go all the way back to your schoolhouse days and you both got the blood of Father Abraham running through your veins and a whole lot of stored up, years-old affection for the man--”

“Maybe if you threw him a bone every once in a while we wouldn’t be in this situation,” Nesselhous interrupted without taking his eyes off the day’s morning print. “You promised him the senate--promised it twice in fact--only to yank it out from under him with both of your hands on the rug all the while. You kidnapped him once and telephoned his wife whenever he was out getting the slick in one of your clubs. Then of course there’s the little fact that somebody in this town went and blew up his nephew’s car while he was sitting in the front seat. And I can’t count how many times you made a fool of the man in front of all your other big pals.”

Tom tossed his plate on a piano table. “He’s a scandal mongering sonuvabitch.”

Nesselhous uncrossed his legs and sat staring at Tom, hunched forward.

“I gave him his commission vote against my better judgment that lost us the city for three years and damn near permanently. I made him city auditor as many times as he lost the senate gig he never had a chance at in the first place with or without my influence in either direction.
And that’s not counting all the thousands dollars of payroll siphons in his pocket that would’ve been in someone else’s if it weren’t for me. I made the man. Built him from the shoes up. But because he only got half of all the things he wanted instead of the whole smear he ran off at a clip ready to squeal to anyone who would give him the listen.”

Nesselhous sighed and sat back against his chair again. Buford was still sitting at the typewriter table with his hands in his lap.

“You know why I like dogs?” Tom said and craned his head up at a portrait of himself with two of his wirehaired terriers at a dog show in Springfield.

Nesselhous considered the painting. “Because they’re better than cats?”

“Because they’re loyal and they don’t try to double-cross you. But George? He’s a backbiting breed and he needs to be put out in the sticks.”

“He wasn’t always. Not without reason, he wasn’t.”

Tom picked up his plate and licked jelly off his thumb. “But all this ruckus he’s stirring up? It’d get to you too just as fast as it nabbed me.”

“I’m well aware. That’s why I’m sitting here trying to read this paper and not motoring off to Washington or Chicago or all the other places he’s been spending his weekends,” Nesselhous replied and his eyes were at the front page again. “All I’m saying is that there’s better ways to clean this mess.”

“Like what?”

“Have you tried talking to him man-to-man?”

“I’m talking to him now.” Tom stood, hitched up his sagging pajama bottoms, walked behind Buford and glanced at the first part of the typed page. “I’m giving him a lot of words to mull over right on this here paper.”
“Anonymously,” Nesselhous said.

Tom clapped Buford’s shoulder. “Read it back to me. Whadda we got so far?”

“Dear Sir,” Buford began, lifting up the page. “There is a little information that I have got I think you should know. A friend of mine here who mixes up more or less with the gang overhead the following conversation. It seems several months ago there was a jew from your city who arranged for a still to be sent to Omaha and set up. The agreement was if the place was raided and the still taken he would pay eight thousand dollars.”

Tom held up his eyeglasses without hooking the ends to his ears and squinted down at the page. “The ink looks a little light. You sure you got a fresh ribbon in there?”

“Brand new,” Buford replied.

“My eyes are going out the door on me just like everything else,” Tom said and went to his large, double-hung window. Taking in the view as if looking out at a wide flat of uninterrupted sea horizon instead of a clot of tumbledown tenements and tin chimneys and cracked building roofs, he began to finish his dictation to Harry with more concentration. “Same paragraph, new sentence.” He paused. “They have never been able to collect the money. Period. They have been informed that several other jews were in with this man George Lapidus and they intend to hold him responsible. Period.”

Buford pounded away on the keys, careful not to make any spelling errors.

“You get all that?” Tom asked.

“Sure, boss. And I ain’t one to judge, but this seems a little vanilla. Hold them responsible?” Buford asked. “If we really want to scare him, shouldn’t we say something more forceful? Like they intend to murder him?”
“No.” Tom turned from the window. “For two reasons no. First, the vaguer it is, the scarier it’ll be. Second, if this letter were ever to come back on me or you or old Billy over there, we wouldn’t want that kind of word in there.”

Nesselhous flipped down his newspaper. “There’s only us three that will ever know about it.”

“It’s psychology, Bill.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, you’ve been stuck with the blade in the backside as many times as I have and you come to learn that people who commit certain offenses are the first to suspect others of the same offenses.”

“That’s a warm compliment,” Nesselhous said.

“Don’t get all bent out of shape about it. I’m protecting us, is all. All three of us.”

“Is that it?” Buford asked, nodding at the typewriter.

“Not yet. One more paragraph,” Tom said. “What was the last line?”

Buford read from the script. “They have been informed that several other jews were in with this man George Lapidus and they intend to hold him responsible.”

“New paragraph,” Tom said. “You can expect a visit from these people here in your city anytime as they are determined to get their money or his life. Period. They plan on leaving here most any day. Period. I am a law abiding citizen and do not want to see anything of this nature happen.”

“So much for keeping out all the incriminating jargon,” Nesselhous scoffed.

Tom smiled but said nothing in response. When Buford finished typing, he turned around in his chair. “Is that the all of it?”
“Yes. That seals it. Don’t sign it. Stick it in an envelope and get it off to your brother’s wife in Chicago this afternoon.”

“Shouldn’t I proofread it first?”

Tom shook his head. “Any grammatical errors will make it more authentic. It’s supposed to be written by a thug, not a schoolteacher.”

“And you’re sure that Chief Towl will pass this onto George?”

“Faster than chain lightning down a fence line. Ol’ Mr. Roy Towl? He favors them Jews better than he does necking with his boyfriends in the back of a roadster out on a lonely stretch of country road. Half of them Jews are his boyfriends, come to think of it. Specially our old pal George.” Tom said and pulled up a tapestry chair next to the typewriter desk, sitting close enough to Buford that their feet touched. “With this letter on file, it will take the heat off Omaha in case we have to snuff him out,” Tom said and looked over his shoulder at Nesselhous who, after a solemn moment, nodded. “You want to do it for us?”

Buford swallowed, but didn’t offer a response.

“You owe some money around town, don’t you?”

“I owe plenty.”

“How much is plenty?”

Buford performed the addition in his head. “About eight hundred, all told.”

Tom leaned even closer, elbows on his knees. “And with relatives in Chicago it’d be a cinch for you to bunk there and lay low. Plus I got a few pals there myself.”

“Like Mr. Capone?”

“That’s right,” Tom said. “Among others. You owe eight? Well, I’ll give you an even thousand plus expenses to do this thing for me.”
Buford weighed the possibility in his mind.

Tom put a hand on his shoulder. “I need you to get behind that fucking turncoat Jew and follow him to Chicago and bump him off. You understand? I need you to do this. And that letter, plus the alibi we’ll set up for you? It will keep you protected.”

After a moment, Buford said, “Mr. Dennison, can I be frank?”

Tom reared back in his chair, waiting.

“I’ve been trying to learn under you for many years so I could follow in your footsteps. You as well, Mr. Nesselhous, sir,” Buford said and looked over to Billy who was holding a cigarette with the ash nearly burning into his knuckles. “But you’re both getting on years and I’ve always wanted to know enough to take your place.”

“Well,” Tom replied. “If you’ve learned anything than you know it’s in your best interest to do this service for me. And Billy.”

“You wanted me to take over for you after you’re gone.”

“Still do.”

Buford bowed his head and exhaled through his nose. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. I know I’ve done it in the past, but it weighs on me everyday. I can’t do it again.”

“You certain of that?”

Buford nodded, slowly.

“Well, that’s disappointing,” Tom said and rose from his chair. He shuffled over to his pink sofa again, picked up a rotary desk telephone, put the entire block in his lap and picked up the receiver.

“Mr. Dennison?” Buford said.
After spinning four numbers on the finger wheel, using his pinkie to turn the dial, Tom looked up as if rudely interrupted and said, “Oh, Harry, you can go now. You’re excused.”

“What are you going to do?”

“None of your concern,” Tom said and finished dialing the number as Buford stood, yanked the letter out of the carriage, put on his coat and hat, and left the suite to make it over to the post office before noon.

* * *

Thursday morning, October 27, heralded the first snowfall of the year and the first day of Rum Trial testimony after the government discharged Harry Buford. Following his three day stint in the box, he’d been escorted from the courthouse under the heavy guard of Chicago secret six investigator Dean Kookier and his staff of five armed officers. At the Union bus depot on Jackson Street he boarded a parlor coach and was hustled to an undisclosed location to meet his family in Indiana or Utah or a hut at the base of the French Alps for all anyone knew.

Good years after all the other prominent figures of Omaha’s Sporting Days were long in the grave—when nearly every new car in the country sported shark fin fenders and the first color television broadcasts were airing on CBS and the Korean War was losing all its fizz--Harry Buford would finally return to his hometown in the back of a hearse to be buried in the churchyard of the Holy Family Parish, four blocks away from where he resided for the liveliest thirty years of his life.

As court resumed without him, many reporters were also absent from the proceedings under the assumption that all the fireworks had climaxed until Dennison himself would take the
stand. A long string of dry-volume testimony was anticipated to close out the month: a district manager for Northwestern Bell, a former county commissioner, wire-tapping agents that could put a colicky infant to sleep in the middle of a thunderstorm. To the surprise of all, especially that of Benjamin Baker, the prosecution had not yet emptied their sleeves of all their trick cards as they called retired mayor James Dahlman to the stand as an unlisted witness.

His entrance into the courtroom fifteen minutes before ten o’clock bent every neck in the crowd. Now seventy years old himself and wrinkled as waste basket paper, many in the audience were shocked by his aged appearance despite the fact he’d last left office as mayor in 1927 following two more consecutive terms once the race riots forced Parsons Smith into early retirement. He walked down the center aisle with the gait of a man on the way to the gallows, a hulking bailiff at each side, one of which opened the waist-high swing door to the court well. Dahlman passed in front of the defense table and first row bench occupied by Baker’s two other clients: William Nesselhous and Milton Hoffmann. He put his left hand on the cool leather of a St. James Bible and took up the same seat which had made a retired Negro police officer the biggest star in town for the past three days.

Seven hours earlier, late into the night of Tom’s seventy-fourth birthday celebration--after he’d been driven home in his Chrysler 66 with a Thompson submachine gun covered by a blanket in his lap and after he’d fallen asleep next to his two grandchildren--attorney Sandall, district attorney Stahlmaster and two uniformed sergeants entered the lobby of the Flatiron Hotel and asked the front desk for the room number of James Dahlman. They were directed to Suite 200 on the second floor and ordered the manager to unlock the door without knocking.

Inside, two hootchy-kootchy dancers with the slinky torsos of salamanders were putting on a show for the former mayor, wearing nothing but their blushes. Sandall stepped into the
middle of the room as both girls screamed. They ripped the blanket off the bed where Dahlman was sitting with his back against the headboard, wrapped it around themselves, and ducked into the corner by a standing lamp. Sandall told the girls to skip the bashfulness, put on some clothes and take a cab ride to the nearest all hours confessional or put on their clothes and take a police ride down to central station, their choice. As the dancers stepped into their skirts, squeezed on their bras, and carried the rest of their clothes out of the room, Sandall removed a long packet from his overcoat pocket and tossed it on the bed next to Dahlman. District attorney Stahlmaster and the two sergeants filled in the other edges of the room.

“What the hell is this?” Dahlman barked, decent enough in his night robe that at least he didn’t have to suffer the scramble for scattered clothing. “You know, if you boys like being a courtroom so much maybe you’d like to be on the other side of it when I drag your hides into a new one for barging in here without a warrant.”

“I don’t need a warrant,” Sandall said and pointed at the packet he’d tossed on the bed. “I have a subpoena.”

Dahlman opened the packet and began to skim its contents.

“You are hereby commanded to report in person to the clerk of the Douglas County Courthouse by ten a.m. tomorrow morning,” Sandall said, tipped his hat and left the suite trailed by his fellow counselor and the two policemen. Once he was out in the hallway and not bothering to shut the door behind him, he called out: “Sorry for the late notice. And sorry for crashing your little stag party.”

So as the reluctant mayor took his seat next to a pair of flagstaffs bearing the stars-and-stripes and the cornflower blue of the Nebraska state banner, he was asked by the same man
who’d just busted up the best pairs of bloomers in the city to identify two men in the room: Tom Dennison and William Nesselhous.

“Mr. Dahlman,” Sandall continued after the mayor had pointed out both of the primary defendants. “In your many distinguished years of service to this city as its chief executive officer, did you ever take orders from Mr. Dennison or Mr. Nesselhous as to the duties of that office?”

“Never once,” Dahlman said, his voice as soft as powder.

“But you were in close and regular contact with both men during the majority of your post as the leader of this city, were you not?”

“Yes, I was and still am. Tom and Bill are both great friends. They did a lot of honest work for me during campaign season to raise funds and offer support.”

“When was the last time you conversed with them?”

“Last night,” Dahlman replied. “It was Tom’s birthday. We had a quiet dinner with a few close friends.”

“And what types of beverages were served at this dinner?”

“Apple juice,” Dahlman said without hesitation.

“Apple juice?” Sandall smirked. “That must’ve been quite the raucous shindig.”

“Just a bunch of geezers eating quail and getting up from the table every ten minutes to use the bathroom,” Dahlman joked, gaining only a few tired laughs.

Sandall skirted around the jury box, wagging a pen. “Let’s discuss a different get-together. One you shared with William Nesselhous on the evening of December 10th, 1931. What do you remember about that night?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.”
“More specific than an exact date and year?”

“I don’t have my old appointment book with me at the moment,” Dahlman spouted off smartly.

“All right. To be more specific, December 10th, 1931, was the day before George Lapidus went missing only to be discovered a few months later washed up on the bank of the Missouri River as the victim of a gruesome homicide. Even more specifically, the meeting in question between you and Mr. Nesselhous took place a mere ten hours before Lapidus’ Cadillac was found abandoned on the Aksarben Bridge by city police and his female companion,” Sandall said and made a quick reference to his notes, “one Claire McArthur was splayed out in the middle of that bridge with a fatal rifle wound to the back of her skull.”

“Objection!” Baker shouted. “Inflammatory. Mr. Sandall has gone far enough with the details to stimulate the witness’s memory of the date in question.”

“Sustained,” Woodrough agreed.

Sandall nodded. “Mr. Dahlman. The conversation I’m referring to took place at a lodging facility in South Omaha known as the Workman’s Home.”

Dahlman stared blankly, lips pursed.

“Mr. Dahlman?”

“I’m not sure what it is you are asking me to disclose.”

“Start at the beginning,” Sandall encouraged. “Tell us to the best of your ability the content of that conversation. Start when you first came to the room Nesselhous had rented for the night.”

“Well,” Dahlman said, pausing momentarily to collect his thoughts like toy blocks scattered around a playroom. He’d had no time to prepare his testimony, no inkling to the
prosecution’s strategy. His responses were without rehearsal or arrangement. Everything was either going to be raw white truth or a jigsaw of patched lies. Revelation or perjury. Sandall would make hay with either.

Dahlman began again, “I do remember when I arrived there was a lull. I knocked on the door and a voice asked who was there.”

* * *

“Who’s there?” Nesselhous had called out through the wood without unlocking the deadbolt.

The Workman’s Home was a flophouse on the corner of 24th and N that served as a neat little hole for abortions performed by candlelight and skin-popping morphine addicts, a one time fabric warehouse before being gutted and cut up into three floors of cramped rooms with exposed piping running along the ceilings.


A phone call just an hour earlier had sprung him from his sleep, Bill on the other end of the line saying his was on the lam for the night, maybe much longer. He needed to talk tonight, urgently. Yes, it was a quarter past eleven. This couldn’t wait.

Nesselhous opened the door slowly and stuck his head out to look down the hallway in both directions. Dahlman squeezed in through the crack as if uninvited. Bill was disheveled: hair all a mess, his clothes smelled like yesterday’s laundry. When the door was closed again, Dahlman saw that Nesselhous had a gun in each hand--a pair of pepperbox pistols used primarily by trappers to execute captured animals.
Sandall stopped his usual pacing of the courtroom. An accountant who felt the need to arm himself and shack up halfway across town on the same night that would see his longtime business partner packing up his Cadillac to flee the city was a little more than curious and lot more than coincidence.

With an exacting tone, he asked, “How could’ve Nesselhous opened the door if he had a gun in each hand?”

“He must’ve used his mouth,” Dahlman replied. “He told me to come on in. He put the guns down and we sat down. He was all-a-shambles. He said he was afraid to admit people or open the door even though he was expecting me.”

“Why he was staying at such a cheap establishment all the way across town when he had more than enough money to stay in any hotel he wanted?”

“Don’t rightly know. He was spooked about something.”

Sandall rocked back on his heels, then onto his toes. “Alright, so you came into the room and sat down with Mr. Nesselhous. What did you discuss?”

“Well, Bill, he said I want you to know that have nothing in the world against Tom or George. I want to assure I’m not standing in either man’s corner.”
Nesselhous’ corner room was no wider than a phone booth. The carpet reeked of odors trapped deep in the fibers: tobacco spit, toe jam, blood. The walls were bare save for a single wooden cross above the iron frame bed without sheets--those cost extra or bring your own. The only other piece of furniture was a small table beneath a naked light bulb hanging from a string. A pile of ash was mounded up like an ant hill on a chipped saucer in the middle of the table, punctured by the stubs of ten Old Gold cigarettes. Nesselhous sat down in one of the two chairs, each wobbly with uneven legs. He peeked out the window that looked down on the corner of N Street where a neighborhood theatre, The Tivoli, advertised a double monster feature: Boris Karloff in “Frankenstein” followed by Bela Lugosi in “Dracula”.

The only luxury he’d afforded himself was a liter of Cutty, the real stuff. He poured a swipe into two paper cups and handed one to Dahlman.

“You drink first,” Dahlman said as he took up the other chair at the table and Nesselhous slurped down his half inch of scotch, then poured another and emptied the cup again. “What’s on your mind?”

“These are the old man’s doings,” Nesselhous said. “It’s terrible the way he’s acting. I’m sick and tired of it. If you say the word I’ll break with Dennison tonight.”

Dahlman consider the amber in his cup, swirled it twice. “I know you think I’m a hooiser. But I’m not hooiser enough to believe that.”

Nesselhous peeled back the disintegrating curtain again, the cloth as greasy as a line cook’s apron. For the fifth time in two minutes he looked down at the street below as if death was coming for him and not his oldest friend and partner who he’d meet so many years ago when both of them were on the short side of twenty and pointed chin beards and ribbon bowties were the latest fashion. As members of the downtown Jewish Community Center, both had served on
the first regional board of the Jewish Welfare Federation. They struck up a shared interest for organizing labor in the city for their fellow brethren long before either had heard of the name Thomas Dennison.

At first, Nesselhous was hesitant to do business with the man. His main focus was youth development in a city largely adverse to cultural assimilation and not private profit. Yet, he eventually agreed, as Lapidus had once told him, “It takes money to further any community in this city, and no one has more of it than Mr. Dennison.”

At the window, Nesselhous put his nose to the glass, index finger holding back the curtain. The zither club on the opposite side of the street was emptying a late night rehearsal: men in matching zoot hats with white bands, toting fingerboards in zipped cases. Many of them were boarding the last operating streetcar of the evening on the Leavenworth route that would take them back to the center of town.

“I don’t want to break with him,” Dahlman said.

Nesselhous drew the shade. “Nor do I. It’s terrible the way George and Tom have fallen out. Between us, we got all the power in this city and there’s this squabble.”

“But George is causing a lot of trouble for Tom.”

“I understand you can put a damper on that,” Nesselhous said.

“He’s your pal,” Dahlman replied. “You and him are best friends.”

“Best? That’s a strange way of measuring such a thing,” he paused. “Best.”

* * *

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Back at the courthouse, Baker fielded a flurry of objections, all of which were overruled by Judge Woodrough. Before the prosecution could resume the examination, Nesselhous himself who had been seated in the first row behind the defense table for the entire trial, leapt out of his seat and scolded the judge:

“How can you let this pass?” he shouted, necktie flapping. “The mayor is damned liar!”

Woodrough rapped his gavel three times. “Order! Order, I say! Defense counsel, I urge you to get a lid on your client before I hold him in contempt.”

Baker turned and grabbed Nesselhous by the shoulders only to be shrugged off with a forceful shove. Tom did not turn around, sedate even in the middle of the eruption, his eyes closed as they so often were, his head held up by his right hand.

“How many objections have you ruled against for the defense and how many have you sustained for the government?” Nesselhous continued to scream. “You go to hell and rot, Judge. You and them Washington boys who put you on their payroll to throw a wet blanket on our case!”

Woodrough banged his gavel again--seven or eight times--as every spectator in the room was roused, some of them standing to get a better view of the action. “Mr. Nesselhous, I find you in contempt of this court. Bailiff, please remove the client from this chamber.”

“Yeah,” Nesselhous said as he was taken into custody by the sheriff, his hands pulled behind his back and wrists locked in a pair of handcuffs. “Of course you do,” he continued to spit as he was led across the courtroom to a side door where he’d be tanked in a holding cell on the floor below for the rest of the day. “Somebody yawns in this room and you haul ‘em away. You goddamned horsewhipping bastard. And you, Jim, you say one more syllable that ain’t true and I’ll make sure you get it, too. Don’t believe a word of this nonsense,” he then yelled at the jury as
he was escorted past the rail in a hurried clip by the sheriff and two bailiffs, struggling with each step, “the only difference between us and the boys they put on the stand is that they are getting it off clean while we got to sit and take the slaps for all their misdeeds…,” Nesselhous hollered all the way into the hallway, his voice still audible in the courtroom until he was down the stairs and his cries ceased.

As the court once again calmed, people retook their seats and whispers accumulated into one undecipherable murmur.

Judge Woodrough asked for silence. “The next person to disrupt these proceedings, be they client, attorney or on-looker, will join Mr. Nesselhous downstairs and sanctions will be imposed to the full extent the law allows. I will have order in this court, one way or the other.”

Then, after pausing to let the room settle, the judge urged attorney Sandall to continue with his examination if he could remember where he last left off.

“May I ask the court reporter to read back the last line of testimony?” Sandall asked.

“You may,” Woodrough said. “Miss Rainey?”

The court reporter lifted the transcript and read, “Dahlman: Bill said it was just awful the way George and Tom had fallen out. He said that between you and me and him, we got all the power in the city and then there’s this squabble.”

“Thank you, Miss Rainey,” Sandall said to the typist and planted his feet firmly in front of the judge’s dais, hands in his pockets. “Yes, now, Mr. Dahlman, returning to something you said earlier. You said Nesselhous suggested he might break with Dennison. Why?”

“I already told you,” Dahlman said, visibly shaken by the outburst. “They’d been in business together for thirty years. But George was causing the rift.”
In an effort to draw him out, Sandall sparked this fire: “And to settle it Mr. Dennison needed to get rid of one or the other. And the one happened to be George Lapidus?”

Dahlman didn’t bite at the bait. “Tom had treated George very nicely in all things, business and otherwise. But Lapidus was a spoiled little kid. If I was in Tom’s place I would’ve treated him more harshly.”

“More harshly than murder?” Sandall asked, eyebrows raised.

“Tom didn’t kill George and neither did anybody he knew. George was on a lot of people’s bad sides. It might have been his wife or someone his wife hired far as anybody knows. You said so yourself, George had a woman with him that wasn’t her when he met his end.”

“Alright, Mr. Mayor,” Sandall, changing gears and ready to dive back into the evening at the Workman’s Home. “Let’s focus our dialogue to what occurred between you and Mr. Nesselhous on the night before those murders.”

* * *

Nesselhous was several drinks into his bottle of Cutty, pouring and swallowing them in quick succession as he continually spied out the window. The hour was drawing near midnight. The room so clouded with cigarette smoke it watered his eyes. Down the hall, a woman started in with shrill screaming. Nesselhous jumped from his chair, picking up both of his pepperbox pistols off the table. Standing with his ear to the door, he listened for approaching footsteps. Three minutes passed before he sat down again and pulled the string on the dangling light bulb, darkening the room save for the moonlight crawling in around the edges of the closed curtain.

“How bad is this?” Dahlman asked, barely able to see the cup in his hand.
Nesselhous’ voice came out of blackness. “The old man and me, we’ve worked together for a long time. But I’ve known George since I was in school.”

“And he’s a fellow Jew.”

“Yes, there’s that. But he’s put our whole livelihood at stake. Not just liquor, but the horseracing and the whoring and beat our politics to hell, too.”

Dahlman waited. He could hear Nesselhous gulp the scotch from paper. “I’m not really understanding what you want me to do.”

“He’s talking to the Feds. To the pro-hes. He’s been going out to Washington and making a mess. He’s giving up the old man to the law dogs.”

“Me, Bill. Me. What have I got to do with it?”

Nesselhous’ nose was back at the window. “You can reason with him. With Tom. Get him to stop what he’s planning on doing.”

“It’d be easier just to get George out of town and keep him out.”

“He already is getting,” Nesselhous said. “Leaving in the morning. And Tom knows the where and the when.”

*   *   *

After James Dahlman was cross-examined and excused from the stand, two more government witnesses were called to testify Thursday afternoon. The first was Peter Abbott, former employee for the department of roads and Aksarben bridge booth teller on the morning of the murder of George Lapidus. Dressed for court in a blue serge suit and blond hair combed straight back, his disposition was that of stunned-in bystander who’d just seen somebody throw
themselves out of an office window. But he had seen something all those months ago: if not exactly a fall from the bridge itself, he’d seen most of everything that came before it and attorney Sandall was bent on prying it out of him even if took a hard twist on the jar lid.

“Mr. Abbott,” Sandall continued after his first few minutes of initial questioning. “In December of 1931, you were employed by the city and served most of your paid time collecting tolls on the Aksarben Bridge, correct?”

“Yes sir.”

“And you were fired from that job not long after a pair of murders occurred there on December the 10th of that same year?”

“Yes ‘um.”

“And why were you fired?”

“Because I abandoned my post.”

Sandall stared hard at the witness, hands held behind his back. He needed no notes today. “And why did you abandon your position at the toll booth when you were the only person there to man that spot?”

“I was fearful for my life,” Abbott said.

Sandall waited a beat, then urged: “Give us more. Why were you fearful?”

The former toll worker stuttered. “As it happened, around eight in the morning, it was a Sunday morning if I recollect right. Yes, and, uh, coming up the bridge, walking along the roadbed there, I seen these three fellas from up the Omaha side of it. They were dressed real sharp. Like saxophone players or something. I never did get a real good look at two of them, but the one who came and talked to me, well, he didn’t talk for that long. Hard as I try I can’t remember his face.”
“Not any details? Hair color? Height? Age? Anything?”

“Well, he was older. Maybe sixty. He had on a hat, pulled down real low. Couldn’t see his eyebrows even. Was about my height or a smidge taller perhaps. But, I don’t know. Like I said, he was real brief.”

“What did he say to you?”

“He offered me some money. Not much. Thirty dollars. Thirty-five, I think. Then he says to me to go on down and get some breakfast. I told him that I’d get fired. He said I wouldn’t. Said my job would be there waiting for me when I got back. But it wasn’t and I’ve been without ever since.”

“He didn’t ask you about a certain type of automobile?”

“Oh yes sir, come to think, he surely did. He was asking if I had seen some kind of red Cadillac. Don’t remember the year or the model. But he was asking about them things, too. He was sure certain of what kind of vehicle he was looking for.”

“Could it have been a series 314, 1927 maroon Cadillac Coupe?”

“Sure it could’ve. Either that or something real close to that.”

Sandall turned to the jury. “The same maroon Cadillac owned by George Lapidus.” Then, back to the witness: “Did you ever see this car?”

“No sir. Not until after all the badness had already happened. A couple of police found me where I was having breakfast down at the bottom of the bridge and walked me back up to the booth. I seen the car then, but not before then.”

Sandall goaded him on, trying to speed up the play-by-play. “But I’ll ask it again, why? Why did you do it then? Why risk your job for such a small amount of money?”
“It wasn’t the money. The man who gave me the money? He had a gun. A pistol. Pretty big caliber from the look of it. He made kind of a pull-back-motion with his hand to move his coat and let me get a long gander at it in his holster,” Abbott said frantically, as if he’d be punished for not talking fast enough. “So I took myself down to Bell’s Diner right quick. I might lost my job for it, but I still have my life. I might not be no hero, but who wants to be a hero and dead?”

* * *

A steady, after-church crowd always filled the seats in Bell’s Diner on Sunday mornings. But at seven-thirty, before the first morning services had ended, the restaurant was still empty save for an overnight cook slumped at the coffee counter taking a cigarette break between shifts and three men in the back booth: Milton Hoffmann, Harry Buford, and Tom Dennison. Each man was halfway through their separate breakfast: Tom letting the rest of his oatmeal with a sliced banana sit untouched, Harry occasionally popping a piece of melon into his mouth, Milton forking up sloppy egg. The waitress refilled their coffee tableside with a half-full pot. They hadn’t traded more than three words since sitting down in the booth.

The restaurant was hushed as library, the calm before the morning rush. Rows of pink sausages spat on the open grill. A busboy stocked water glasses. After checking his pocket watch, Tom counted out a few dollars for the breakfast tab stuck to the side of Milton’s plate with grease. Draining their coffees, thanking the waitress for her kind service, and lifting their jackets off the coat tree by the front door, all three men exited the diner and climbed into a black Rolls Royce Phantom 1.
Buford drove them out of the parking lot and around a dirt road two blocks away to a vacant spot under the Aksarben bridge. He pulled the car up to the edge of the sluggish river. A sternwheeler paddleboat approached from the south, churning up foam and blowing cinders from its twin smokestacks.

Tom patted Buford on the arm before opening his door. Milton hustled around to the trunk and retrieved a five-gallon gas can he’d filled before they stopped for breakfast. Together, they began their ascent up the bridge footpath. The temperature was a few degrees above freezing with a clear sky. As they approached the middle of the bridge, the teller in the toll booth stepped out into the westbound lane. Even from a distance, he could see the three men walking towards him each wore a homburg of a different color: one brown, one black, one red with a pink band.

* * *

The last witness to appear in court on the day after Tom’s seventy-four birthday was T.H. Ochiltree, auditor of the Union Pacific passenger division. A railroad man all his life, Ochiltree stood only five and half feet tall but was built like a tugboat—short and squat and capable of a physicality that defied his size. His purpose as a government witness was to identify two round-trip train tickets departing from Omaha with a final destination to San Diego. Attorney Sandall, voice fading from six hours of examinations that had begun with his questioning of James Dahlman, held the two tickets in his hand as he finished with the day’s proceedings.

“Mr. Ochiltree,” he said, “How long have you been an employee of the Union Pacific railroad?”
“Nearly twenty-five years.”

“And what position do you hold for that company now?”

“I’ve been serving as the chief auditor for the past three years.”

“Auditor of the passenger division?”

“Yes sir.”

“And as auditor, would you be able to illuminate for the court the details of the two train tickets I have here in my hand?” Sandall said, approached the witness box and handed Ochiltree the printed slips.

The witness paused for a moment, unsure of how to respond.

“Have you seen these tickets before today?”

“Not since you just handed them over to me, no.”

Sandall smiled and circulated the court well. “And what you information can you gather from them at first glance?”

After studying the tickets, Ochiltree responded, “Well sir, it’s pretty plain. Don’t need to be an auditor to tell you that these are two round-trip tickets issued December 7th, 1931. Departure from Omaha scheduled for eight a.m. December 9th, arrival in San Diego scheduled for December 11th, ten p.m. Umm, let’s see. Names on the tickets list the passengers as Thomas Dennison and William Nesselhous.”

“Yes,” Sandall jumped in quickly, “You are right. Everyone in this courtroom would deduce that same information without having any knowledge of the railroad business. But, as an auditor for the passenger division of the railroad, what else could you tell us about these tickets that most people would fail to notice?”
Ochiltree scanned them again and a realization registered on his face. “Well, whoever bought these tickets never took the trip.”

“And how did you come to that conclusion?”

“Well, there are no notations by the conductor anywhere on these tickets. The purchasers as named never boarded the train or else they would be marked as such.”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Ochiltree,” Sandall said and turned to face the audience, then the jury. “And so we have proof here, gentlemen of the jury, that both Mr. Dennison and Mr. Nesselhous did indeed purchase train tickets that would have verified their absence from Omaha between December 9 and December 21, 1931, and given them their alibi for the murder of George Lapidus. Yet, as Mr. Ochiltree just testified, these train tickets were never used. As you can now see, both men were not only in Omaha on December 11, 1931, but they were concerned enough about that date to want the possibility to prove otherwise.”

“Objection,” Baker shouted, his loudest outburst of the entire trial. “Mr. Sandall’s oration assumes facts not in evidence. A canceled trip cannot possible verify the motives of either of my clients and Mr. Sandall’s postulation to the court that a mere set of train tickets not scratched by a conductor’s pencil as a confirmation of involvement with the slaying of George Lapidus is not only reckless, it’s slanderous!”

“Sustained,” Woodrough ruled immediately. “But, Mr. Baker, there’s no reason to shout at such a level.”

“I will rephrase my argument,” Sandall said, “but in doing so, let us recall this morning’s testimony from James Dahlman. The meeting between him and William Nesselhous occurred in Omaha on the night before the murder of George Lapidus, which proves without assumption of any kind that he was not only in the city on December 11, 1931, but that he was holed up across
town so as not to be seen in town. And the dialogue between Nesselhous and Dahlman, as
recounted by Dahlman himself, also proves that Tom Dennison was in Omaha on that date.”

Baker rose again. “Objection, your honor. Mr. Dennison lives in Omaha and has lived in
Omaha for the past forty years. Does his residence here make him a suspect for every crime
committed in this city in that time or am I misunderstanding the government’s argument?”

“Sustained,” Woodrough said. “Mr. Sandall, please reserve your speechmaking for your
closing statement, not witness testimony.”

“Very well, your honor. But let me pose one more question to the court concerning Mr.
Ochiltree’s testimony. Why would two men purchase round-trip train tickets at their own
personal expense two days before departure, later decide not to use those tickets and then never
pursue a refund? But it is true. As pointed out by Mr. Baker, this information does not confirm
involvement or prior knowledge of the murder of George Lapidus on the behalf of either Mr.
Dennison or Mr. Nesselhous. But it does raise some very serious suspicions. All I am saying is
that if I booked passage to California and never went, I certainly wouldn’t pay the fare,” Sandall
paused, scanning the faces of the jury members, then turning to the defense table. “Unless of
course I wanted to prove it to anyone who might think I was lying.”

* * * * *

As the sun rose on Sunday morning December 11, 1931, George Lapidus awoke in the
same place he’d been staying the past three nights: the back room of Bright Star Laundry in
Chinatown--part drycleaners, part opium den. Past the innocuous front of a giant carousel of
bagged suits, the vast majority of the building was a cove of individual rooms in a layout similar to a boarding house. Each room held two bunked cots with a bamboo-beaded doorway.

For thirty dollars he received the full parlor treatment—an entire room to himself where a curvaceous Asian woman with a Mikado tuck-up and veiled face served his every whim. With his head resting on a box-shaped pillow, the hostess brought him a chromium cocktail tray of paraphernalia: top-grade li yuen opium, a pair of lamp wick scissors, a bamboo pipe, a yen dong lamp, a sponge in a seashell-shaped basin, three short needles and a lidded gaiwan of tea boiled in a hibachi.

Sleeping next to him on his bunk was a young woman with bobbed auburn hair still dressed in a sequined evening gown, Claire McArthur: a local operetta star and Lapidus’ newest lady on the side.

“Wake up,” George said to her as he rang his hand bell for the hostess and lit a morning cigarette.

“Something else, sir?” a woman asked as she parted the beaded curtain.

“Freshen me up a bit more tea and bring the tab.”

The woman nodded graciously and exited the room as George shook Claire on the shoulder. “Wake up,” he said again, “we got to skedaddle.”

Claire opened her eyes and rolled over. “Ten more minutes.”

“No, now. I got to be in Chicago by nightfall and we got a full day of driving ahead of us,” George said, rolled down his sleeves, buttoned them at the cuffs, and refastened his belt. He squeezed cool water from the sponge on the back of his neck and let the excess drip down inside his shirt.

“Can’t we just take the train?” Claire asked and yawned.
Lapidus stood and shrugged on his brown suit coat. They’d been living like refugees for most the week. Claire’s dresses and cosmetics packed away in a steamer trunk, Lapidus’ suits in a pair of tartan suitcases stacked next to their bunk. “You know we can’t and you know why.”

The hostess brought in the tea pot with two handless cups on a silver tray. Lapidus handed her a fifty dollar bill to cover last night’s expenses, told her to keep the change. Passing on sugar and lemon, he slammed down a whole scorching cup in one swallow before it had a chance to steep and extinguished his cigarette in the little bit of pale leftover in the bottom of the mug. Claire sat up and began to heat a dipping needle from last night’s tray in the flame of an opium lamp.

“Enough with that,” Lapidus said and took the needle out of her hand. “I said we got to be getting on the road.”

“Let’s at least go down to the YMCA for a shower.”

“You can shower in Chicago.”

“I haven’t bathed in two days.”

“When we get up to Chicago we’ll get a nice hotel room. You can shower then.”

“We ought to take the train.”

“There’s a perfectly good Cadillac sitting outside that I bought just because you liked the color,” Lapidus said, pointing to the window. “We’re driving.”

“I’m staying here,” Claire said and lay back down on the bunk.

“Fine with me,” Lapidus replied, dropped a few balled-up dollars on the floor and picked up his suitcases. “Do what you want.”

When he was halfway out the door, Claire sprung from the mattress. She scooped the loose bills off the floor, left her streamer trunk of clothes behind, and followed George out the
back door of the laundry, fitting on her heels and walking at the same time. “George, wait. Wait. I’m coming, I’m coming.”

After loading up their suitcases into the backseat, they stopped to buy a pound of imported, perfumed cigarettes from a tobacconist and four bottles of strawberry soda. Once on 10th Street, at half past eight in the morning, they neared the Aksarben Bridge that would take them over the river and out of the city. There was no traffic in either direction, a clean escape in sight.

In the middle of the bridge, Lapidus slowed to a stop at the toll both. Without paying much attention to the persons in the booth, he cranked down his window and held out a single dollar while he petted Claire on the face, admiring her beauty even in last night’s makeup, waiting for change. Still holding his dollar aloft in the air, he finally turned to see Harry Buford standing at his window and aiming the barrel of Browning shotgun directly at his head. A second man in the booth who Lapidus also recognized immediately--Tom’s longtime muscle man Milton Hoffmann--picked up a large gas can and tugged on the brim of his hat. Both walked out to the middle of the eastbound lane: Harry moving to the front of the Cadillac and Milton stepping through the exhaust behind the bumper.

“Pull your car up ten feet and put the transmission in park,” Buford instructed, his shotgun aimed at the windshield.

Lapidus took his hands off the wheel and held them up in a sign of surrender.

“Slowly now,” Buford said.

Lapidus, knowing his only saving grace was to comply, drove his Cadillac a few feet away from the booth. Once the car nudged forward, Buford held out his palm to signal the stop. Claire pulled her cloche hat down to her eyebrows and Lapidus told her not to say anything.
“Let me do the talking. I known these fellows a long time and they’re not dumb enough to do anything out here in the open, so long as you don’t aggravate them,” he told her as Tom appeared from behind the bridge truss and made his way over to the driver’s side window. Claire nodded and stared straight ahead at the dashboard.

As Lapidus looked back over his shoulder, he was face to face with Tom who poked his head inside the window, concealed his pistol behind his back, put his other hand on the roof of the car and said, “Going on a vacation are you, George?”
Chapter Fifteen: Long Live the King

On his third and final day in the witness box—November 18, 1932—Tom came to court in his worst condition yet. His four-year-old grandson, Christopher, had been rushed to St. Catherine’s for an emergency appendicitis operation and Tom had stayed up nearly all the night in the hospital waiting room. The previous two days on the stand had also worn him down considerably, as he was first called as defense witness. During Baker’s initial examination, he read from the transcripts of Harry Buford’s testimony. Statement by statement, Tom had denied each accusation.

“What do you know about the Capone system?” Baker had asked.

“I don’t know anything about it.”

“Buford testified that he endorsed the system on your behalf. Does his endorsement mean anything to you?”

“Not a thing in the world.”

“Buford also said you had so many conversations with him and Nesselhous about liquor that he couldn’t remember them. Is that true?”

Tom shook his head fiercely. “I never talked about liquor with anyone. The reason Buford couldn’t remember them is because they never happened.”

“Did you ever meet Al Capone?”

“No sir. I met an Al Brown once.”

“Do you know that Capone went by that name before he was known as Al Capone?”

“I had heard so.”
“Did this Al Brown you met resemble any pictures you have seen of Capone?”

“No,” Tom replied dryly.

“Did you place Buford in charge of the negro district, as it’s called in North Omaha, after the death of Dr. Jack Broomfield?’”

“I should say not. Broomfield was a dear friend of mine. He was true blue. There was no replacing him, especially not by my orders,” Tom replied and on and on went his rebuking of Buford’s testimony, declaring all of it an outright fiction.

Now, on his third day of testimony, the prosecution’s cross-examination by Sandall was set to begin. Making light of Tom’s ragged appearance, still dressed in the same oxford gray suit he’d been wearing on the stand the day before, he began by asking: “You admit your name is Tom Dennison, don’t you?”

“I do,” Tom answered before Baker could object.

“Your honor, what’s the meaning of this?” Baker asked. “If the prosecution keeps this up we’ll be here until Christmas.”

With a short laugh and roll of his shoulders, Sandall apologized to the court and started his line of questioning as bluntly as a man with both barrels cocked. “Mr. Dennison, did you know George Lapidus very well?”

“We knew each other, but I never talked politics with him. He was on one end and I the other,” Tom said, his eyelids as heavy as house drapes.

“You were opposed on political issues, weren’t you?”

“Only on political issues,” Tom said and captured a wet cough into his embroidered handkerchief.

“And you were bitterly opposed, weren’t you?”
“No sir. And let me say this,” Tom said, pointing his index finger with the same hand that held his soiled kerchief. “There are whole bunches of fellows I don’t see eye to eye with on politics. But that doesn’t mean I write them threatening letters or try to have them killed.”

“Well,” Sandall said, pacing, “in the past two years have you the same interest in politics as before? I mean, considering your health and your recent losses at the polls?”

Tom rested his head against his liver-spotted hand. “As I always have.”

“Don’t you consider politics a business?” Sandall asked firmly.

“No. A pleasure.”

“Are you a political boss?”

“No. A political worker.”

“Okay. Well, as a political ‘worker’, were you interested in the 1918 campaign?”

“Of course. I’ve been interested in every election in this city since I moved here.”

“And who was on your ticket in the 1918 election?”

“It was the Dahlman ticket. I can’t recollect them all.”

“Were you for Dahlman every time he ran?”

“I was.”

“You were not the only fellow who voted for that ticket, were you?”

Tom laughed. “No.”

“Yet, in 1918, the year after the State of Nebraska went dry and two years before national prohibition, the Dahlman ticket lost the election for the first time in four terms,” Sandall said and paused. “And that was when you decided that the illegal liquor business would be more profitable than the illegal election business, was it not?”

Tom closed his eyes for a moment.
“Mr. Dennison?”

“Yes?” Tom asked, eyes still shut.

“Mr. Dennison, do I need to repeat the question?”

Tom opened his eyes. “No, I was never interested in the liquor business after the state went dry. All the money I had already? It wasn’t worth the risk.”

* * *

Two months after the murder of George Lapidus, his body recently recovered on a sand flat in Kansas after floating some three-hundred miles downriver, federal agents seized ten-thousand gallons of alcohol at Tom’s largest still in Sarpy County, known only as “The Farm”. Sitting on twenty acres of muddy winter cornfield, the farm consisted of four connected structures: a stave silo, a horse stable, a dismantled armory filled out with old war materials brought back from Russia, and a feed store that never sold a grain of corn or a wisp of barley unless it was canned in a mason jar--a gay jest of late even time during the Noble Experiment that was no different than every other tire store that never stocked a single Michelin and every other corner sweetshop that sold more rum than rum cake.

At six o’clock on a Friday evening in the middle of February, under a giant slab of lavender sky, four radio-equipped police cruisers and three scout cars wended up the only sloppy clay road that led in or out of the acreage. The rutted road was littered with the gray socks of dead corn husks like highway trash thrown out of passing car windows. The vehicles pulled up into a circular formation in front of the main barn, cordoning off access to the road. Headlamps
on their tie-bars snapped dark and car doors shut softly as the largest raid in Nebraska state
history was about to begin.

An hour earlier, at the limestone federal building, prohibition officer Jack Beazell--
federal wire-tapping expert and first witness who would be called upon to give testimony in the
Rum Trial--listened in on a phone conversation picked up from a tap at the Owl Eyes cigar shop,
an incoming call.

First the sound of watery static on the line, a coughing hello, and then the exchange that
sent seven federal agents and fourteen city police streaming twenty miles outside of town to a
little farm on the bank of the Platte River:

“This is Righty Jean at the five and ten,” the incoming voice said as Beazell cupped a
headphone to one ear, cigarette burning from the side of his mouth. “I want two white and three
red. What can you put me in for?”

“Twenty-four bucks for the red, ten for the white,” the voice from the cigar shop
answered.

“Holy smokes.”

“That is what it will cost.”

“Put Billy N on the line. I want to talk to Bill.”

“This is Bill.”

“You bet, Bill. Didn’t hardly recognize you. Got a cold?”

“Hayfever. Like a somuvabitch.”

Then, after some indecipherable mumbling, a new voice: “Hello? Hey Bill, This is
Johnny Ford. Send me five red and five white. Got me a going away party tonight.”
“All right, Johnny. How’s everything?” The man who identified himself as Bill N-- presumably Billy Nesselhous--replied.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think we need a new sheriff.”

“Sheriff? Who?”

“McDonald. He’s not doing his duty. You know I got a trial coming up tomorrow. Reason I’m getting five of each tonight.”

“Government rap? What charges?”

“Sale and possession.”

“Well, sure hope you come out all right, Johnny. You know how all us boys like you so down here.”

“Yeah? You outta get the old man to fix me up. Or fix up McDonald more like it.”

“Right, since he’s got all the time in the world for a penny candy crook like you. You beat it out on your own. But the red’s on me tonight for your send-off. The white’s still on your hip.”

“Send it on out to my place.”

“No can do. Sorry, sport. No deliveries this week. Feds are so hot they’re afire. You go on down and pick it up at the farm.”

“Christ, Bill. That’s forty miles both ways.”

“Enjoy the drive,” the recipient of the phone call at the cigar shop finished and the line was disconnected. Half of the building’s agents were already stomping down the staircase and out to their radioed Buicks, yelling to each other: “We got a hot one! Live wire!” and “Heading out to the country!” and “God Bless Alexander Bell!”
When the agents marched into the main farmhouse and connecting stable, gripping their revolvers so tight their knuckles went white, they discovered what appeared to be the largest hub of liquor trafficking in the entire state. Without a shot fired, they seized four-hundred charred oak kegs, thirty-thousand bottles of rum, brandy, and whiskey, oak chips, corn sugar, boxes of yeast, hydrometers, one-gallon tins, bottle cappers, pressure tanks and gas burners. The only thing they left behind were the desks and the chairs.

The raid on the farm wasn’t the only trouble that February held. Way up north, on the frozen shipping lane of Lake St. Clair crossing over from Canada into Michigan, more the thirty custom-built Packards and Oldsmobiles with reinforced suspensions had their front wheels go through a soft spot in the ice, rear fenders tipped toward the sky, submerged headlights illuminating twenty feet of water below. Others were left rolled over on their sides like giant animal carcasses, car doors and windows dressed up with bullet holes from a firefight while they skidded and slalomed over the border.

That month alone, the customs border patrol captured sixty-three automobiles packed tight with illegally imported spirits, eight-thousand cases of beer, two hundred of whiskey. Real numbers. The most important of which added up to 310,000 dollars--the amount of money Tom lost on his end alone from the busted lake hoppers.

While Omaha prohibition officers were gutting the farm of everything but its furniture, Tom was thirteen hundred miles away. He’d been staying at cottage hotel in the Adirondack Mountains near Lake Placid to attend the 1932 Winter Olympics with his new wife, Nevajo.

The games were opened by New York governor Franklin Roosevelt who was planning on running for president in November and would eventually win by a landslide. In fact, at the very hour that the agents gutted the farm, Tom and Nevajo had just returned from watching the sled
dog races with Roosevelt and his heavily bundled and mittened wife, Eleanor. In quiet
deridence, Tom told the governor he needn’t worry about wasting any campaign time in
Nebraska—all seven of the state’s electoral votes were in his hat. Roosevelt thanked him silently
with a couple swift pats on the back and offered him a Nat Sherman cigar from his coat pocket.

“Best in New York,” Roosevelt had said and the two men stood puffing and blowing as
they watched a Canadian musher take the gold. By the time the presidential election took place
later that year—unbeknownst to him at the time—Tom would be a month deep into the Rum Trial,
enable to control his city let alone the whole state. But even without his squeezing and with the
exception of two lonely counties, Roosevelt swept Nebraska much like the rest of the country.

Upon his return to the village hotel—a clot of fabricated log cabins at the base of a ski lift
stabbing up the slope of White Mountain—the manager raced over to Tom and handed him three
messages he’d taken at the front desk. Tom flipped over each handwritten note from the same
caller—no name had been left, only a phone number.

In the privacy of his room, slumped down on a red leather couch under the heads of three
mounted elk, Tom was patched through to his office at the Dodge Hotel, Milton Hoffmann
manning the phones.

“Barrel,” Tom said, holding the receiver after wrapping it in his handkerchief as if it was
melting. “What’s the word?”

“Bad news, boss.”

Tom inhaled sharply.

“The farm got knocked off tonight.”

Tom lowered the receiver from his ear and smacked his lips. “Goddamnit,” he said
calmly, “When?”
“Still happening. Feds crawling over it. Got word in from one of our boys as it was going down.”

“Alright. No more orders for the rest of the night. Not from anywhere.”

“When you coming back?”

“I’ll be on a train tomorrow,” Tom said.

“They got Harry.”

Tom coughed. “What the hell was he doing there?”

“No. Separate thing. He got caught trying to steal a car.”

“I’m gone four days and police start arresting other police?”

“It was McCulloch’s car.”

“John McCulloch’s?” Tom asked though he already knew the answer.

“Bad night all around,” Milt replied.

“That stupid goddamn nigger. What the hell is he thinking? I gave him a Packard last Christmas.”

“Some people ain’t got but straw for brains,” Milton said.

“Alright. Close it up. All of it, for now. I’m on a train tomorrow.”

“Sure enough, boss.”

“And say, Barrel, be careful tonight. It’s Friday and if they get you too they could hold you until Monday,” Tom said and hung up the phone gently only to launch it across the room five seconds later, busting it against the wall.

Following two days in a Pullman sleeper, Tom and Nevajo were back in Omaha on Monday morning: Tom standing in front of Harry Buford’s cell in the Douglas County Jail, housed in the basement of the city courthouse. Twenty-four, six-by-eight feet brick cells painted
peppermint green with metal bunks lined the entire block. The floor was covered in spots with standing puddles of linty water from an overflow of the nearby laundry room.

Buford was asleep on his bunk and Tom stood for a moment at the bars, watching him snooze until he kicked the metal. He rose from his mattress, his face a mess of purple bruises, his nose crooked and broken in two spots, his left eye swollen shut, and his shirt front stained with dried blood.

“Hey there, boss,” he said, resting his hands in the slats between the bars. “Suppose you’re right mad at me.”

Tom craned his neck. “What in the hell happened?”

Buford was about to begin, stammering out a few syllables, when Tom interrupted him.

“Lifting a car is one thing,” Tom said, gesturing with both of his gloves held in his left hand. “Lifting a car from one of our own pals is another. But even that would’ve been something we could smooth out. Hell, we could’ve chalked that up to one big misunderstanding or even made it out to be a little joke. But then I get the gust in my ear that you’ve been slipping into the man’s house when he’s out and putting the blocks to his old lady? And you stole his cat, too? What in the hell is wrong with you?”

Buford rubbed his neck, stared at the floor. “I know I let you down, but--”

“McCulloch’s fixing to plug you soon as he’s able to get close enough.”

“You gotta help me out of it.”

“I am helping you. I’m the reason you ain’t got the metal yet.”

“You gotta get me outta here,” Buford said and spit a clot of blood on the floor.

Tom handed him his handkerchief through the bars. “Who roughed you up?”

Buford wiped his mouth. “My bail’s set for five hundred.”
“You’re staying here,” Tom said.

“Why?”

“McCulloch’s got so much on us that I have to take his end of it.”

“Why put me up against it?”

“If it had been him who had stolen your car and was raising your wife’s ankles three times a week, then he’d be in there and me telling him what I’m telling you now.”

“So you leave me in the middle holding the bag?”

“For a while,” Tom replied. “You need a little cooling-off time.”

Buford leaned closer to the bars and lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’ve got plenty on you, too. Lots more than that two-cent bootlegger.”

Tom snorted and began to walk away before pacing back. “I’m going to tell you something and I want you to listen to it and think it over for a few nights.”

Buford waited.

“You listening?” Tom asked. Then, slowly: “If you talk, if you say one word, by God, I’ll give you what we gave George.”

*  *  *

On Friday of the seventh week of the Rum Trial, testimony was finally complete following a string of small-time rebuttal witnesses was called by the government. After the jury was excused for the day, Benjamin Baker made a motion for a dismissal of charges against Tom Dennison and the other fifty-eight defendants. Leaving his purple suit coat draped over his chair
at the defense table, his white canvas shoes squeaked across the waxed floor as he ran his thumbs along the inside of his suspenders and cleared phlegm from his throat at regular intervals.

“Your honor,” he continued his plea on the grounds that definite proof to violate the federal prohibition act had not been established against any of them. “If the case against my client goes to the jury, it does so on the testimony of Harry Buford alone. No Buford testimony, no case,” he said and glanced at the empty platform the jury members had recently vacated to be taken to dinner and then back to the Hill Hotel. “Yet, there was not a word of truth in his testimony and if the court finds with me that his testimony was unreliable, it is the duty of this court to direct a verdict.”

Judge Woodrough considered the petition about as thoughtfully as choosing an entrée from a dinner menu. “I might feel the same as you, counselor, but it is for the jury to decide.”

“Then the court agrees with me on the falsity of that testimony?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Not quite. But I draw that conclusion.”

“It is not in my providence to rule on this,” the judge said.

Baker tapped the eraser end of a pencil against his hand and launched into a long diatribe that was as polished as memorized play lines. “Your honor, one case in point is that Buford testified that on the night of the raids of a facility in Sarpy County known as ‘The Farm’ he heard Dennison cursing George Lapidus. But after defense proved Tom was in New York at the time, Buford reneged his testimony to say it was Nesselhous who was cursing Lapidus. Yet, Nesselhous was also proved to not be present at that location, as he was not among any of the twenty-six men arrested that night. Neither was Harry Buford himself, who at the time was being held at the Douglas County Jail for vehicle theft. Furthermore, even with numerous wire tap
transcripts taken over a period of two years, the federal government has shown only an
acquaintance between Dennison and Nesselhous with the other defendants in this trial, but not
for any criminal purpose. If we hand the decision over the jury they might say, ‘Well, golly gee,
here’s a lot of fellows who appear to have done something bad and we’ll find them guilty’, when
the evidence is insufficient to prove the actual charge. The only evidence of conspiracy is the
testimony of Buford which was disputed by thirty other witnesses and changed by his own
admission--large, crucial points of which were later proved fictitious. Fiction is the kind word.
Too kind, actually. A more accurate word is perjury. And all that what we are left with is that
perjured testimony of a proven liar in which he claims Tom Dennison outlined the Capone
system of trafficking in liquor here. That is the conspiracy or there is none. But no proof of such
an arrangement has never been established. Lastly, the practice of submitting a case involving a
large number of defendants is extremely difficult for a jury of inexperienced men to follow and
even hazardous if submitted in such a form.”

Judge Woodrough reclined back in his chair as if waiting for Baker to say more. For a
moment he looked as if he might crack and send everyone home, but then replaced his octagon
spectacles on his nose and replied: “I concur with the ruling of the circuit court that it must be a
rare case in which it would be conducive to a just administration of justice to gather together a
large number of persons such as in this case and accuse them all of conspiracy relying upon
isolated, disconnected circumstances.”

He paused and scanned the faces of the four attorneys seated at the prosecution table,
then continued: “On that other hand, situations may arise, and the government claims there is
such a situation here, where circumstances justify that kind of prosecution and there is no power
in the court to prevent a general charge of conspiracy from deliberation by the twelve persons
assigned to that duty. The testimony ought to go the jury as to some of the defendants. As to individual defendants, they are entitled to be heard in this matter and when counsel is prepared to arrange such arguments for them in numerical order as they appear in the indictment, I will hear such requests on a case by case basis. But I will not dismiss the whole of these charges in one collective pool.”

Baker, still standing as the judge levied his decision, bowed his head and swiveled around on his heels. “Before that, I move to exclude from consideration by the jury all reference to murder or shootings, as no connection between such incidents and the alleged trafficking of liquor was shown to have been taken part in by any of the defendants including Tom Dennison.”

Sandall, sitting patiently in his chair, finally brought himself to his feet. “Your honor, it was never the prosecution’s intention to warrant charges of murder. But these things tend to show conspiracy to violate the prohibition act and some of the defendants might have had something to do with that violence.”

Woodrough shook his head. “I will not exclude conversations overhead or taken part in about any shootings or murders revealed in any of the given testimony.”

Both lead attorneys stood next to each other in the court well, waiting with childlike expressions of anticipation as if they were the only two still waiting to get picked for the last spot on the schoolyard baseball team.

“As I see it,” the judge said, “the only binding link that would justify the submitting of the case to the jury would be proof of the guilt of Tom Dennison. And I believe there has been enough established in this case to allow the jury to decide upon that guilt. So unless there is anything else, gentlemen, court will resume Monday morning at nine o’clock for your closing arguments.”
Seated in a wicker rocker draped with a crocheted antimacassar, Tom stretched his socked feet out towards the crackling fireplace in his parlor room. On the serpentine-backed sofa next to him was Billy Nesselhous and his son, Howard, who had come over for dinner: braised woodcock with white mushrooms, lobster bisque, carrots in purple puree, molasses pie. To aid in their digestion, both Billy and his son nursed snifters of plum brandy while Tom held a bottle of milk wrapped in a napkin. Howard, not a week removed from his thirty-third birthday, resembled his father in every feature: heavy eyebrows that touched above his pointed nose, a dark whoosh of carefully parted hair, gaunt cheeks, wide-set olive eyes. In the fireplace, pear wood clicked down into bits of silver and yellow ash, filling the room with a scent of fruit smoke. Standing lamps with Tiffany shades cast an amber glow across the room. The walls were hung with mahogany paneling, dark as chocolate. The firelight reflected so fully in Tom’s bifocal lenses that neither Billy or Howard could see his eyes, only the watery flicker of orange flame.

In the corner of the room, a cabinet radio as large as an armoire was set to local station WAAW, tuning dial 860. Covered with a lace doily and equipped with a grand opera speaker, the voice of announcer Ronald Coram provided an update from the courthouse. The reception was as blurry as a report transmitted via a Marconi wireless from a fishing trawler in the Bering Sea:

“…in the latest news from day forty-eight of the rum trial at the Douglas County Courthouse in which alleged political boss Thomas Dennison and fifty-eight others stand accused of violating the Volstead Act, Federal Judge Wilson Woodrough denied the defense a
dismissal of all charges just after six p.m. tonight. Once the jury was removed from the
courtroom under heavy guard, lead defense attorney Benjamin Baker filed the petition for the
dismissal. For more than five minutes in his usual brow-beating fashion, Baker bloviated upon
the many reasons he believed that the court should direct a verdict on behalf of all fifty-eight
defendants and bypass juror deliberations.

“Chief among his rationalizations were two points. First was that no definite proof had
been established by the prosecution against any of the indicted to be directly involved with
conspiracy of violating federal liquor laws. Second was that primary government witness and
former Omaha police officer Harry Buford had given perjured testimony on the stand late last
month. Perhaps the most succinct and direct part of Baker’s argument came when he declared,
and I quote: ‘If the case against my client goes to the jury, it does so on the testimony of Harry
Buford alone. No Buford testimony, no case’, unquote.

“After a quick back-and-forth with government prosecutor Lawrence Sandall, Judge
Woodrough swiftly cut down Baker’s motion for the dismissal, later adding that the only link
which would justify the case being turned over for jury deliberations was proof of guilt of star
client Thomas Dennison. Proof of which, Woodrough claimed without much hesitation, had been
well-enough established over the past two months to allow the jury to decide his fate. The single
allowance made by Judge Woodrough was that he would entertain dismissal arguments for
individual clients on a case by case basis. It is rumored that some thirty-two defendants will be
cleared of their charges before court resumes on Monday. Also rumored is that excluded from
that number, whatever it finally amounts to, are the most notorious clients in the case, including
William E. Nesselhous, Milton Hoffmann, and Thomas Dennison.
“In the end, the last-gasp theatrics that occurred in the courtroom today fizzled out as quickly as they were ignited. Defense attorney Baker’s motion for the dismissal, despite his feverish animation, was more akin to begging than a formal plea, more an act of desperation than determination. Court is scheduled to resume Monday morning when both trial counsels will offer their closing arguments before the case is turned over to the jury. Another note, which will come as no surprise to most, is that for the third day in a row, defendant number one Thomas Dennison was absent from the proceedings due to an undisclosed illness. He has been taken sick at his home under the care of his primary physician and there is no timetable for his return…”

“Turn it off,” Tom instructed as he rocked back and forth in his chair at a steady clip, wrapped to his shoulders in his blanket and holding his milk with both hands.

“The broadcast isn’t over,” Nesselhous said as the radio announcer’s voice continued to pour through the speaker.

“It is over,” Tom said sternly as Nesselhous reached over and switched off the knob. Circling his index finger around the lip of his milk bottle, he added: “Win or lose, this trial is our last rites.”

“The jury will never convict,” Nesselhous said.

“They don’t need to,” Tom replied. “The game was over as soon as we stepped foot in that courthouse. The city won’t have any part of us in next year’s elections. We haven’t found anyone on our half worth replacing Dahlman in nearly six years. The moral boys have their golden incumbent waving the flag and the cross on every street corner--”, Tom said, his voice trailing off.
“Maybe all we need is an influx of new blood,” Howard added, holding his snifter with an upturned palm as if it were a baseball, his last two words snapped up quickly as if he wanted to draw them back inside his mouth.

Tom looked to Billy who cleared his throat and gave his son a hard stare.

After an awkward moment, Howard set down his drink, rose from the sofa and said:

“Excuse me, gentlemen. I need to use the facilities.”

“I’m sorry about that, Tom,” Nesselhous said after his son had exited the parlor, closing the French doors behind him.

“He’s a good boy,” Tom said and brought the milk bottle to his lips. “And he’s right, too. You’re a grandfather of five and I’m a block away from the cemetery.”

Nesselhous nodded. “He’s got his mother’s brassiness. Too much of it.”

“And your smarts,” Tom added. “Top of his class at Amherst. It wouldn’t be a bad move, easing him into the spot.”

“I’m not sure that’s something I want for him.”

“He’s very influential. That he’s already proven.”

“He won’t be able to succeed you.”

“It wouldn’t be for lack of skill, that’s for certain.” Tom closed his eyes. “Machine politics is over in this city.”

“And what would you do with yourself?”

Tom considered the question with another sip of milk. “I’ll either be in the penitentiary or on a beach. Either way, I’m leaving Omaha for good,” he said as Howard reentered the room and took up his seat next to his father.
Setting down his bottle on the lamp stand next to his rocker, Tom clipped the nib off a Nicaraguan cigar with a pair of tiny scissors and placed the end in his mouth. On the opposite wall surrounding the stone fireplace were two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with the leather spines of books on every manner of subject: Civil War battles, countless law and economic texts: *Paton's Appeal Cases* and *The Wealth of Nations*, matching violet-colored editions of the complete Charles Dickens’ library, history of the Byzantine Roman Empire, haberdashery. While scanning the tall rows, unable to read any of the titles from across the room, Tom said out loud, as if talking to himself: “In many kingdoms, the transfer of power occurs at the precise moment of death so that there is always a monarch on the throne. I believe the French were the first. Do you know what they said to declare it?”

Howard looked to his father, afraid to speak again.

With some pause and igniting his cigar, Tom answered his own question: “The king is dead. Long live the king.”

“You’re in a grave mood, tonight,” Nesselhous said.

Tom chuckled. “Suppose I am. Something more cheery perhaps?” Then, after another pause, he glanced at Howard who sunk into the deep couch. “Have you ever heard how I met your pops?”

“I think we’ve had enough talk of perjured testimony for one day,” Nesselhous said and waved his hand.

Howard inched up in the sofa, straightening his back. “I’m not very good at gleaning the moral out of a story. I thought the tale of Job was meant to make kids scared of the ocean until I was twenty.”

“No morals,” Tom said, blowing cigar smoke. “Just a story.”
May, 1901. Tom was in his first office behind the beer cooler in Madam Anna’s brothel, preparing to leave for the evening. A phonograph blared a Verdi opera through its brass horn. Outside, the gauzy rain was so heavy he could see his reflection in the window like a mirror--the glass might as well have been painted with two coats of quicksilver. The Missouri river had already flooded twice that year with the first great winter melt and again once the spring thunderstorms started. Milton was on duty as footman that night and, just as Tom threw his jacket over his shoulder and scooped up his briefcase, the former bare-knuckled boxer knocked on the door and cracked it open.

His voice was its usual exasperated wheeze. “Boss, a man here to see you about a job if you have the time. A musician he says he is.”

Tom turned. “I’m already running late.”

Milt nodded. “I’ll see him out. Sorry to disturb.”

“Alright,” Tom groaned, thinking even then--as always--about votes. “I have ten minutes. Send him in.”

Tom did not recognize the man and extended his hand to invite him to have a seat opposite his desk.

“I’ll stand,” the musician said.

“Suit yourself. I don’t want to lead you on, though. The only job I currently have to offer is late night custodial work. A midnight shift over at Halton’s Coat and Shoe Emporium. Been a lot of applicants through my door in the past month.”
“So long as it’s regular.”

“Every once in a while I could use you as a backup pianist on weekends at my Horseman’s Club. My doorman says you’re a musician. You play the piano?”

“Piano, fiddle, tambourine, banjo, guitar. You name the instrument, I can make it sing.”

The musician paused and unbuttoned the top two facings of his shirt as Tom was busy scratching down notes on a letterhead sheet of paper. “I can also play a mean harmonica. Or would you call it a kazoo?”

Tom stopped writing, still unaware of who the man was despite his subtle reference to the bunco game so many years ago that earned him a knife in his belly back in Sulfur Springs, Colorado. “Haven’t any use for anything beyond the piano. Now this custodial job will pay you twenty dollars a week, which is a handsome wage in this town. And if I ever need you on the keys, it will be short notice and pay you five dollars a night plus tips. Do you have a permanent address here in town where I could reach--”

“You don’t remember me, do you?” the musician interrupted, opening the neck of his unbuttoned shirt. “I seen your picture in a Denver newspaper a few months back. Reason how I discovered your whereabouts.”

Tom looked hard at the man. “From Denver, you say? You one of Fred’s boys? I apologize, but I meet hundreds of fellas every month.”

“It may take a long while, but everything you do in this life has a way of coming back around to you, good and bad both.”

Tom shook his head. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well sir, let me tell you something else you don’t know. A little something about poisons that might stimulate your memory. Prussian Blue isn’t a toxin. It’s an antidote. Perhaps
you remember dumping that down my throat? Made me sicker than a dog and I spent a good two
days vomiting it up. But it seems when you tried making the purchase, you gave the druggist a
queer concern as to your intentions. He sold you a remedy, not a venom. Told me so himself after
I recovered. Is this ringing any bells? When was the last time you were in Sulfur Springs? Eleven
years ago to the month, perhaps?"

Finally Tom realized the identity of the musician and stood quickly from his chair,
reaching for the revolver he kept in his top desk drawer. The musician was quicker to the draw.
Plunging his hand inside his left sleeve from his open shirt collar, he retrieved a tiny two-shot,
flintlock pistol that was strapped with rubber bands to his bicep so as not to be discovered when
he was frisked upon entering the club. Without hesitation, he fired both percussion caps. One hit
Tom just above his heart and the other missed entirely--shattering a glass vase on the bookshelf
behind his desk.

Immediately after the twin shots rang out, the musician dropped the pistol and sprinted
out of the office. He fled down the steps, pushing over two other patrons and knocking a tray of
whiskey to the floor as he jumped down the staircase and blew out the door. Tom rose to give an
abbreviated chase. A splotch of blood the size and color of a raspberry widened into a larger
stain on his shirtfront as he hollered for his men to stop his assassin. The musician continued his
jaunt out into the street, but only made it halfway down the block before he was gunned down. A
smattering of .22 caliber bullets--fired from the same bouncers who frisked the musician not
twenty minutes earlier--ripped through his body, bringing him first to his knees, then flat on his
stomach. Just as quickly, the doormen dragged his dead body off the street and around to the
back of the saloon. They sat it up inside an outhouse and kept guard until they received word
about what to do with the corpse.
Upstairs, Milton came to Tom’s aid, helping him to his feet. “You shot in the heart, boss. We need an ambulance.”

Tom grimaced and held his arm. “No, no. He got me in the shoulder. In my meat. Christ, the bullet didn’t go through,” he groaned and spit up bile. “Bullet’s in my back muscles, my shoulder blade.”

Then, just as he was able to stand under his own power, shooing away Milton’s helping hand, Tom collapsed again. He reached out for the corner of his desk to help regain his balance, but managed only to knock his phonograph to the floor. The disc shattered, silencing the opera music. After smacking his head on the ground with a hard thud, Tom looked up at the ceiling and immediately lost consciousness.

When he awoke the next morning, he was lying in an unfamiliar bed--stiff and small with an iron frame and scratchy white sheets. His vision came into focus as slowly as if the whole world around him was a single image of photographic paper submerged in a stop bath. Two rows of identical beds filled the room, each one separated by a paper partition. Piercing white light bounced off the tile walls where two large chalkboards bore the names of the other patients in the room and their ailments: Herbert McKenzie, bed 6, yellow fever; Sara Gladstone, bed 11, pellagra; Bruce Tyson, bed 4, hookworm; Jessica Sands, bed 9, influenza; Vincent Hill, bed 14, broken wrist.

A pair of nurses in pink blouses, white aprons, and cone-shaped hats scurried back and forth from a dressing station. As Tom sat up in bed, he felt the pang in his shoulder, which was bandaged in gauze and a plaster splint. The last thing he noticed as he fully awoke was a man dressed in a dark blue, three-piece suit sitting in a metal chair with his legs crossed at the knee a few feet away from his bedside.
“Good morning, Mr. Dennison. Do you know where you are?” the man asked.

Tom adjusted a pillow behind his back and wiped his eyes. “Who are you?”

“My name is William Nesselhous. My friends call me Billy. You can call me Billy.”

“Christ, how the hell did I end up at St. Catherine’s? Where is Doc Arnold?”

“How do you know you’re at St. Catherine’s? You sure this isn’t St. Joseph’s or Central Methodist?”

“I ought to know. I own the place.”

Nesselhous uncrossed his legs and hunched forward in his chair. “You own this hospital?”

“Well, I own the owner. Or owners, I should say. Same difference.”

“You own the Sisters of Mercy?” Nesselhous asked in disbelief.

Tom groaned in pain, his vision still blurry. “The Catholic Church.”

“You own the Catholic Church?”

“What are you, a parrot? Yes, I own the downtown diocese. How do you think they afford their chalices and fancy robes? And why are you so obsessed with what I own or what I don’t?”

“It’s just a curious thing for--”

“What did you say your name was again?” Tom said and closed his eyes for a moment to curb a spell of dizziness.

“Billy Nesselhous. I’m associates with George Lapidus.”

Tom swallowed hard. “George Lapidus? Barely know the feller.”

“After last night’s debacle, your wife Susan phoned us and asked that we confer with you about a business proposition.”

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“Sue Anne,” Tom corrected him and winced. Every spoken word sent a charge through his shoulder. “No one calls her Susan. Christ, what kind of wife isn’t here after her husband gets shot and instead sends some flannel suit over to talk about business?”

“A concerned one. She spent the entire night here by your beside with your daughter. I sent her home an hour ago to get some rest after the doctor stabilized you,” Billy said and handed Tom a white cuspidor that contained the bullet extracted from his shoulder. “You’re a fortunate man, Mr. Dennison. An inch or two lower and instead of lying in a hospital bed you’d be laid out on a mortician’s table.”

Tom shook the bowl, swirling the dented cartridge around in the porcelain basin and said, “Like a tooth in a tin can.” He paused. “And what of that bastard musician? What happened to him?”

Nesselhous smiled. “What do you think happened to him?”

“Full of a bunch of these, I suspect,” Tom said, shaking the bullet inside the cuspidor again. “So what’s the proposition of the day that has you hawking at my bedside like some vulture with a briefcase?”

“I am financer,” Nesselhous replied and snapped open his satchel. “I own a number of laundries in the fourth and second wards.”

“Nesselhous,” Tom said, chewing over the name in his mind. “Ain’t you broke?”

“Nearly. But what I’m offering and what your wife called me about is that my laundries might not just be good for cleaning a suit. They could clean your money as well. What happened last night is a product of the kind of businesses you run. It’s a dangerous racket, especially for a husband and a father. Susan very much desires that you consider moving your funds into more pedestrian operations.”
Tom closely examined Billy’s appearance and, with a great deal of assumption, said:

“And you’re just the Jew do it? A regular Shylock come to free me from my burden of wealth?”

“I’m not after a pound of flesh. I’m here to save your skin.”

Tom smiled, a painful feat he wouldn’t attempt again for a week. “You know your Shakespeare, at least. That’s a start. I very much go in for the theatre, myself.”

“I know you do. I know a great deal more about you than you realize. So do a lot of people, which is part of the problem. But what strikes me most is that for man who so enjoys a good yarn, it’s a shame your businesses are all but a one-note plot.”

“This coming from a man who can barely keep his laundries afloat? Perhaps this is odd arithmetic for you, but I like to make money, not lose it,” Tom said and took a large swig from a glass of water on his bedside table. “Besides, I already have a number of legitimate business partners.”

“Like Edward Rosewater?”

“That’s right.”

“And that’s the make of man you consider to be straight-laced?”

“Supposing I do, what are you offering that I don’t already have?”

Nesselhous cinched up his tie and handed Tom a thick yellow folder. “A plan. In five to seven years, if you so choose, you won’t be a grafter anymore. No more bullets, no more booze. You have more than enough to live on for the rest of your life, not to mention your children and possible grandchildren’s lives as well. But whether or not you do, in fact, end up living is up to you.”

“You got a sharp wit, I’ll give you that. I bet you could dull razorblades with that tongue of yours.”
“Better than you can dodge a bullet, sure.”

Tom exhaled through his nose.

“I’m sorry. That was uncalled for,” Nesselhous apologized and stood from his chair. “I realize this is not the time or the place to discuss any of this with any kind of detail. So, I wish you a speedy recovery and ask that you go over that packet when you have the wherewithal. Talk with your wife and think of your daughter. I may be only be a numbers man, but I can help ease you into a life that doesn’t risk death in order to turn a dollar.”

* * *

On Monday morning, the last day in November, after the jury had settled in and the courtroom filled beyond capacity, both counsels were prepared to make their closing arguments. People standing in the fourth floor hallway were hushed as if in silent prayer, hoping that whatever words spoken from within would be loud enough to leak out into the corridor. More hats and dresses waited down in the lobby and spilled out into the streets where cars were parked on both sides for three solid blocks in every direction, the traffic carnival-thick. Inside the courtroom, four panting radiators hissed steam. The tall windows were blasted opaque with a layer of frost, a cottony winter light made the morning feel more like late afternoon. Rising from his seat at the request of Judge Woodrough, defense attorney Benjamin Baker took his final stab first, his voice low and subdued, patting one hand against his stomach as if suffering from a bout of indigestion and beginning:

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, before I delve into the specifics of my final address to you here today and before you are taken away to decide amongst yourselves the fates of the
remaining sixteen defendants in this case, I would be amiss and default of my duties as lead
defense to not remind you of one simple fact, and that fact is this: the charge, the only charge
which you may consider, is that of conspiracy to violate the Volstead Act. The sale, manufacture
and distribution of illegal liquor.

“Yet, throughout the course of this trial, the government has raised myriad accusations of
crimes that range from murder to attempted murder to bribery to political assassination and even
electoral fraud. In my opening statement nearly two months ago, I warned you about such
detoured connivance and dilution of the original charges pending in this case that would be aired
as a smoke screen to distract and inflame your better judgments. And, I’m afraid, that
proclamation has come true. The prosecution has done their best to link politics, alleged
instances of violence, and the threat of violence to liquor, an aim so desperate that they reached
back thirteen years into our history and promised multiple offenders immunity in order to do so.
One of those offenders promised a free pass for his crimes is a man that you are by now well
familiar with, disgraced Omaha police officer Harry Buford.

“Mr. Sandall and his bunch ask you to believe a man who admits he violated his oath of
office as a police officer, who broke his every vow to this city, his church, and his own family. I
don’t know what the prosecution thinks, but I know what every honest man thinks about that
kind of creature. Buford said he ‘saw the light’ after Dennison refused to quash his criminal
charges, including theft, that stood against him.”

“I can’t hear you,” Sandall said from his chair when Baker’s voice softened as he
approached the jury railing.

“I am saying to you and the jury,” Baker said, raising his volume and facing the
prosecution table, “that it was not the light of Moses, not the light of heaven that Buford saw
because after he had seen the light, he crept into another’s man home, stole his automobile, his wife and his furniture. I am saying the only light he saw was from the flames of perdition. If I were a prosecutor in the face of Buford’s perjured testimony, I could not ask a jury to place credence in any part of his story, for it’s false and black as the pits of hell!”

Baker paused after his brief explosion and began to pace the court in a straight line.

“Buford said that on one occasion Tom went to see Al Capone in Chicago when Capone was in a Pennsylvania jail cell. This story was fabricated to paint the picture as bleak as possible because it was known what effect on the public a Capone background would have. Yes, Tom Dennison has been a gambler. He bets on horse races, but he gambles on the square and is not a liar and a contemptible rat such as Buford.

“Do you think Dennison an idiot? Do you think he would outline a criminal plan to a man he kicked out of his office and did not trust even as a minor political worker? Furthermore, Buford first testified that Dennison had cursed George Lapidus and then the very next day he changed his testimony to say it was W.E. Nesselhous he talked to, not Dennison. If you are not confused or concerned about this kind of denouement, you haven’t been paying close enough attention. Perhaps something came over Buford’s dreams that night. But it was not from above, it was from below. He learned it couldn’t have been Dennison he talked to because he had gone to New York. So when dawn came the next morning there was this smiling hyena who said, ‘I was mistaken. It was Nesselhous’. Strange how confused he was despite the fact that Dennison and Nesselhous look about as much alike as I look like Apollo,” Baker said, earning some scattered laughs at his own expense.

“Attorney Sandall and his pack of Washington imports charge me with being connected with crooks, as he calls them. But as much as I think of my right arm,” Baker said and stretched
out his arm, shooting his cuff, “I would cut it off before suborning perjury. And yet the
government still has the effrontery to ask you to believe this scoundrel! I would like to know if
the immunity given Harry Buford extends to perjury on the stand in this trial. He crucified
himself right there.” Baker pointed at the empty witness stand. “And instead of the prosecution
admitting the falsity of the whole miserable mess they brought Buford back and attempted to
correct his lies. I wonder that the jury did not rise in their box and render their verdict right there.
But now you have your chance at last to issue that verdict and I am hoping, I am expecting, that I
will have the privilege of communicating to Tom Dennison at home on his sick bed that the
verdict of the jury is not guilty.”

After Baker thanked the court, the floor was handed over to the prosecution. Attorney
Sandall began his closing remarks by wheeling over a mobile chalkboard and placed it in front of
the witness stand at such an angle that all in the room--especially the jury and Judge Woodrough-
could see without strain. Before speaking, he rolled his sleeves to the elbow and began to draw a
diagram of the government’s perception of the hierarchy of the Omaha liquor syndicate. At the
top of the board were two names next to each other in large bold print: Tom Dennison and Billy
Nesselhous. Funneling down from their names were the ranks of all sorts of men, each connected
by a web of crisscrossing lines resembling that of an extensive family tree: hijackers, drivers
moonshiners, dealers. As he continued to scribble in chalk, patting the dust occasionally from his
fingertips, his back was turned towards the court like a school teacher.

“Mr. Sandall,” Judge Woodrough finally said, “this is most unconventional. As an
attorney, you are a man of words, not illustrations.”

“No pictures here, your honor,” Sandall replied and finally turned to face the jury, his
diagram not yet finished. “Only an outline of names the will help educate the jury as to the
prosecution’s depiction of the liquor syndicate in this city as we see it. In fact, just three days ago Mr. Baker himself admitted that a case with such a large number of defendants, even after that number was whittled down considerably, can be confusing to follow. If it would please the court, my use of this chalkboard as a visual aid will serve to relieve such confusion.”

Then, setting the chalk in the wooden sill at the base of the board, Sandall began his closing argument in earnest. “Gentlemen of the jury, I would be amiss to start my final appeal to you without first congratulating Mr. Baker and the other defense attorneys in this case for their zealous and thorough work on behalf of their clients. It was an admirable and formidable battle that has not only challenged you nearly every day for the past two months, but has also made me and my fellow government counselmen better lawyers ourselves for having to compete and quarrel with such sharp and educated minds.

“Yet, after listening to Mr. Baker’s own closing statements, the only argument I heard coming from his mouth is one that has been beaten tirelessly throughout the course of this trial. In fact, it is the only thread of hope that the remaining defendants can cling to, and that is the accusation of perjury on the part of one solitary witness, Mr. Harry Buford. However, as you are all well aware, our prosecution has brought forth more than fifty witnesses who testified against Tom Dennison and other members of his syndicate about their involvement in the manufacture and distribution of liquor in this city. And still the only focus, the only point of contention Mr. Baker and the rest of the defense could raise were a few isolated mistakes of memory on the part of one witness. Mistakes of which were corrected and admitted to in an honest and apologetic fashion. Of course, we are all humans and, as such, we are prone to forget certain details of our pasts. No born man, woman or child possesses an iron clad memory. Still, we do our best to
remember all that we can as best we can, especially when the accuracy of our memories will
have some say in the fates of others.

“Such was the case with Mr. Buford. There is no denying that he confused a couple dates
and names during the course of his testimony. But considering the fact that Buford was on the
stand for three straight days--longer than any other witness--and subjected to so many different
questions that spanned a timeline of more than ten years, it is a wonder that more than ninety-
nine percent of his testimony was not only accurate, but precise. If I were called upon to testify
for the amount of time as Mr. Buford about any part of my life, I would not be able to match half
of what he was able to remember. In fact, I would dare say with absolute certainty that the
testimony given by Buford was not only admirable and honest and true, but it was also a matter
of unparalleled bravery. It takes a special amount of courage for a man to admit to his past
transgressions to himself. But to also bare those same mistakes and sins of his life to a group of
complete strangers that all the world may listen to and read about and judge is not only
courageous, it is heroic. Yes, he worked in alliance with our nations’ government and for his
efforts was rewarded with immunity. But such is common practice for any man with as much
highly valuable information as Mr. Buford was privileged to in a federal trial.

“Yet, what is immunity worth when all the friends and associates of your life, when all
the residents of the city in which you live, are able to sit by and judge and condemn you from a
distance? Do not be fooled, gentlemen, immunity is no reward in comparison to all the other
hardships Buford has faced and will continue to face throughout his life because of his decision
to come clean and work for our nation’s just system of law. His fortitude is of the kind rarely
seen in any avenue of American life anymore. Yes, defense counsel was of course able to
procure multiple witnesses to take the stand and discredit Buford’s testimony. But it would be a
poor criminal organization that could not dig up such witnesses. Gangsters will always be found who are still loyal to the gang.

“Also, and Mr. Buford would not want me to say this for he is too proud, but because of his sacrifice in this very chamber, he wakes up every morning and will continue to wake up every morning fearing reprisal for his actions from the same men you will shortly be given the power and responsibility to judge in this case. No longer can he and his family live in Omaha. And not because of disgrace as Mr. Baker insists, but because of fear. He has abandoned all the safety and comforts of his home in pursuit of the truth. What greater virtue can a man bestow upon not only his own conscience, but to his city and country? It is a sacrifice that will follow him for the rest of his days. And so when you revert to the privacy of your hotel quarters to discuss the many points of testimony raised by Mr. Buford, I would urge you with all my heart and mind to never forget that heroism. I would also ask you all to consider not just his words, but the words of every other witness who took the time to make clear for this court the nature of Mr. Dennison’s liquor operations in this city.

“Curiously enough, as vital and paramount as was Buford’s testimony in this case, one element that was equally if not more important was the murder of George Lapidus, a point of which Mr. Baker failed to mention to you mere minutes ago. This was no accident on his part. He hopes you might forget it altogether. But you will not. How could you? Perhaps still fresh in your memories is that every single time Lapidus’ name surfaced in this room, Baker fielded more objections that I would ever care to count. And nearly all of them were denied. But why, you might still be asking yourselves, why would we as prosecutors in this case and as representatives of your government focus so fully on the murder of one man when more than seven others were
laid victim to violence in connection with the charges of conspiracy to violate this nation’s liquor laws?

“Well, I will be glad to make our purpose clear to you now if it is not already. Like Harry Buford, George Lapidus was a man with inside information concerning the crimes for which every remaining defendant stands indicted. However, unlike Harry Buford, George Lapidus was a man with a perfectly clean record who did not need any favors from the government in return for his dutiful assistance to our investigation. He came to the federal government and its appointed prohibition officers working both in Omaha and elsewhere of his own volition. Sickened by the crime he bore witness to, he was compelled without gift or promise to bring those guilty of such crimes to due justice. Yet, also unlike Harry Buford, Mr. Lapidus was never able to testify in this court, never able to share his knowledge with you because nearly a full year ago he was murdered in brutal fashion by the same hardened criminals he was devoted to stopping not only for his own safety, but for the safety of this city.

“One of those criminals are now seated among us in this very room. Some are not. One of them is resting in the comfort of his own home, taken ill with cold in old age. Yet, neither does waning health or elderly age abstain any man from the sins of his past. I would sincerely advise you to not allow any possible sympathy for such a condition to cloud your minds and objective judgments. For three months leading up to his violent and ghastly slaying on the Aksarben bridge, Mr. Lapidus was working with the same federal agents who have appeared as witnesses in this court. If he were to have remained alive, it would have not only been disadvantageous to those now facing the consequences of their actions, it would have been detrimental beyond repair. Make no mistake, the murder of George Lapidus was one that was carried out in fear as much as it was vengeance. And to let the abhorrent act of taking another
man’s life pass from your minds because the charges in this case are those of violation of our national liquor laws and not of murder itself would be an omission of ungodly and unforgivable proportions.”

Sandall, taking a few long breaths, then turned his attention back the chalkboard, pointing out his writing as he spoke. For nearly twenty more minutes he continued to outline the intricacies of how the organization was run based on testimony and wire tap transcripts. Often he paused to read directly from the court records to refresh the jury’s memory about such facts. Finally, after going through the hierarchy of the board in lavish detail, he pointed again to the name at the top of the eight-foot-wide chalk slate: Tom Dennison.

“In an organization for monopoly of the liquor business,” he said, standing with his waist against the jury railing, faint chalk prints on his trousers, “who would logically be the head? Who but a gambler who has found gambling not so profitable and turns to liquor trafficking as a more profitable venture? And who but a man with significant political influence could operate and hold together such a wide-spread syndicate? And not only its own members, but employees of the city as well, including but not limited to police officers, councilmen, and business leaders? Yes, Mr. Baker decried this government’s efforts to unveil for you, gentlemen of the jury, all of Mr. Dennison’s political affiliations. But without the proven establishment of such political connections, it would be a hard line and an absence of the truth to show how he was able to secure such a reach that allowed him the freedom to illegally import and manufacture the product for which he stands accused.

“Furthermore, since Mr. Baker has so vehemently charged witness Harry Buford with perjury when in fact no such intentions ever existed, let us look upon another witness whose testimony was substantially more suspect, that of Mr. Thomas Dennison. During his time on the
stand, he denied he met Al Capone, but his admission that he met an Al Brown who asked about his chances of selling beer in Omaha illustrates an interest on his part and an influence in the liquor traffic here. As much as Mr. Baker hoped to discredit the testimony of Harry Buford, I would dare to double his fevering arguments against his own client for the same reasons.

“As I said before, the two isolated occasions upon which Mr. Buford simply misremembered a date or a time were corrected on the stand. There was no attempt to deceive or exaggerate. The same cannot be said of Mr. Dennison. He is not more honest than Buford, he is simply craftier. He did not misremember events or names, he simply veiled his statements to conceal his crimes, statements of which were purposefully prepared to distort the truth. His motivation for doing so should be no secret to you. And that is where I will leave you, gentlemen of the jury. I leave you with all the facts and details that prove every remaining defendant in this trial to be connected and involved with Tom Dennison and his liquor syndicate. And as thankful as I am to Judge Woodrough, my fellow government attorneys, and every member of the defense team, I am all the more grateful to you. Your attention and exhaustive devotion to our legal system and the honored system of justice in this country is an effort that should be applauded from every set of hands not only in the city of Omaha, but the entire nation. Thank you all and God bless.”

After Sandall returned to his chair, Judge Woodrough glanced at the clock, then his pocket watch as if in stunned disbelief at the time on the wall and checking it against his own unit of measurement. He asked both counsels if they wished to submit any requests for instructions to the jury and each side presented their materials. The two alternate jurors were then excused from the room, forever free of all obligations to the case. Deputy United States Marshal Earl Young and his staff of his six bailiffs were sworn in by the court to oversee the protection of
the jury in their private hotel during their deliberations. Lastly, Woodrough addressed the remaining twelve main jurors as to their duties under the law--an entire pantheon of commands and reminders that possessed all the dynamitism of a set of factory instructions on how to assemble a bicycle out of a box. So it was as the jury was escorted to dinner and then onto their private floor of the Hill Hotel that the Rum Trial was recessed and would not reconvene again until a decision had been reached. For all the loquacity and pleonasm spouted by both sides of the bench over the past two months, all that remained to be heard were the one or two words that would ever matter: guilty or not guilty.

*   *   *   *

The Hill Hotel was a twelve-story chunk of pale brick and Colonial Revival architecture on the Sixteenth Street Mall. Holed up on the sixth floor, the jury deliberated for seven straight days while a grip of zero weather seized the city. Men in swallow-tailed coats and flat hats dumped snow down manholes and washed it away with hoses to prevent clogging the sewers. Railroad lines were impassable until rotary snowplows with two locomotives coupled behind them wormed through the heaps of powder. Toilet water froze overnight. Peaches in grocer windows were encased in frost. Cloud cover was as thick as paint. Still, every evening at six sharp, all twelve jurors were led in a double-filed line out onto the sidewalk for dinner at one of two nearby restaurants: Graham’s Grill for cheeseburgers on toast or the Mayfield Oyster Bar for broiled bluepoints served in tin pails.

On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday they sent word to court they had a report to make which was always the same short quip of news: “We cannot agree.”
Still hopelessly deadlocked, Judge Woodrough called both counsels and the jury into court on Monday, December 9th, for a progress report on a possible verdict. Tom Dennison made his first appearance in nearly two weeks dressed in his finest checkered suit and crimson tie, finally recovered from his bout with influenza. He stood behind the defense table without a cane, hands clasped at his groin, smiling thinly as the jury took their seats on the platform.

Calling on jury foreman Casey Bysong--an oil station manager from Fremont with a morass of silver hair and so thin his stomach nearly touched his backbone--Judge Woodrough asked if they had reached a verdict.

“We have not, your honor,” he said flatly.

Woodrough, who late the night before became ill with grip, fumbled his fingers on his forehead and asked: “Do you feel you have done all you can to reach a verdict?”

“Yes, sir,” Bysong replied, “We do.”

At the defense table, Tom closed his eyes and smiled.

“Well,” the judge said. “I give your statement sympathetic consideration. You have served long and have been virtually held prisoner. Your deliberations over a number of days and the hardships imposed on you by this service are something I am very mindful of. I feel you have been very patient, but I am sure you are conscious of the desirability of reaching a verdict if possible.” Then, after a pause, he asked, “Mr. Bysong, have you any other statement to make in regard to this?”

“No, sir.”

Woodrough then individually asked each juror if they felt the same way and if they believed there was any possibility of reaching a verdict if given more time and, one by one, each response was the same quick “No, sir.”
A dull silence filled the courtroom as the recently ailed judge seemingly considered his options were there was only one and, after what seemed a full minute, finally closed the case by saying, “Considering the lack of headway in the jury’s deliberations and their admittance here to this court that no possible, unanimous verdict could be reached in the future, I have no other choice but to declare a mistrial.”

Immediate confused filled the room, sent up in whispers and full volume conversation alike: *Was it as good as an acquittal? Would the government be able to prosecute again? In the spring, maybe? How close were the jury ballots? Defeat or victory for Mr. Dennison?*

But before all the formalities were finished, before Judge Woodrough could calm his court, and before anyone else, Tom was exiting the court as fast he could move his weight on his cane, heaving his way down the center aisle as people in the audience reached out, some of them patting him on the patting him on the shoulder, some of them grabbing at his suit sleeves. Many people were standing, some remained seated. Some cheered, some booed. The Hoffmann brothers were galloping behind him and came up on each side to serve as barriers from the crowd. Also closing in once Tom was in the hallway and headed for the elevators were thirty news reporters and cameramen barking off questions.

Down in the first-floor lobby, a new mob swelled around him as he was led outside, bulbs flashing. He never looked up once, his vision concentrating on his feet as he lumbered down the marble steps where his Chrysler was waiting on the curb of Farnam Street, double-parked against a long row of Fords and Buicks. The reporters continued to fire off their questions and Tom answered those that could be heard in the midst of the clangor with a few flippant responses:
“It’s the bunk,” he said on the sixth step, still descending, head still bowed, his weight reliant on his walking stick. “The trouble is that jury is too dumb. They couldn’t even get to first base. The prosecution poured so much into their heads they didn’t know what it was all about.”

“And what think you about the efforts of the prosecution?”

Tom heaved down onto the lower tier of steps. “Well,” he said with great effort, winded by his quick departure. “I hope those birds have a good Christmas dinner.”

“Do you feel vindicated by the jury’s indecision?”

Another half-hearted chuckle, breathing heavy: “I should’ve been acquitted. Every person in this city knows that no conspiracy ever existed. The prosecution proved me innocent by its own witnesses.”

As he reached the sidewalk and stood with his door opened, he took one final look out at the courthouse, its steps flooded like a wedding congregation filing out of a church to send off the bride and groom.

“Mr. Dennison,” one last question rose out of the muck before Tom crouched down into the Chrysler’s backseat. “Do you have anything to say to the jury?”

Tom shook his head. “Why would I? I don’t know them any more than they know anything about me, apparently. All the government did was waste a lousy eight grand to pay for their time. Give me eight-thousand dollars and I’ll find eight-thousand better things to do with it for this city.”

And with that, Tom inserted himself into the upholstery and slammed his door shut as the crowd pushed around the car on all four sides. The Hoffmann brothers crawled inside after him, Milton joining Tom in the backseat, Chip in the passenger seat. As cameras continued to snap and explode, the Chrysler nudged forward and was poised to make its escape even if it ran over a
few toes. Once clear of the chaos, it careened north down Farnam like a getaway car fleeing the
scene of a bank robbery, tires spinning wildly on the snow-packed pavement. Some may have
guessed at it, some would later claim to have predicted it, but as Tom was ushered away from the
courthouse on that eighth day of December, 1932, it would prove to be the last time he was ever
seen alive in Omaha.

* * *

Two short nights after the Rum Trial fell out of the newspapers, three of the jurors still
coop ed up in the Hill Hotel called prosecuting attorney Sandall who had returned to his home
office in York, Nebraska. Their message was short and clear: *We have information we think you
should know. Come at night. Come alone.*

At eleven o’ clock, on the one year anniversary of the murder of George Lapidus, Sandall
knocked on door 703 of the Hill Hotel. Inside, wastebaskets overflowed with crumpled ballots
the twelve men had gone through in trying to reach a verdict the week before. More torn paper
littered the floor. The maid service had not cleaned the room in some time and the three
remaining jurors hadn’t left either. Standing bathwater laid in old puddles around the tub and
toilet, saturated towels heaped in piles. Days old egg foo yong was left in the bottom of oyster
pails on the radiator by the curtained window. Sandall took a seat on the edge of one of the
unmade beds after wiping crumbs off the spread and set his hat in his lap.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “Like the place so much you decided to stay?”
The three jurors took up chairs around him. Sandall studied their faces. They were terrified. “Jesus,” he said. He’d never seen such honest fear. He shook his head and repeated the word, “Jesus.”

The first juror and foreman, Casey Bysong, uncapped a gallon jug of needle beer, took a long swallow and passed it around to the other two like campfire whiskey.

“Have a drink, lawyer man,” Bysong said when the bottle returned to him.

Sandal folded his hands together. “That’s against the law.”

“What you going to do?” The second juror asked. “Take us to court?”

Sandal sighed, reached for the jug, took a quick swig. Handing it back over and wiping his lips, he asked, “When’s the last time any of you left this room?”

“We’ve been tampered with,” Bysong said.

Sandal took the information with little surprise, but said nothing.

“At least one of us for sure was fixed. Maybe two.”

“Who?”

“Larry Holman.”

Sandal recalled all he knew about the man, which wasn’t much when he thought about it: Larry Holman, a middle-aged farmer from Northern Nebraska who wore the same orange tie every day of the trial and, from his responses during the peremptory challenges, proved himself to be neither for or against prohibition. Certainly not the best candidate for the government. Certainly not the worst, either.

Sandal swigged from the jug again. “Well, that makes sense.”

“You going to try and prosecute again in the spring?” Bysong asked.

“No. As I understand it prohibition is coming to an end.”
“What should we do?” the third juror asked.

“Go home,” Sandall replied, stood, and put his hat back on his head.

“I mean about the juror who got paid off.”

“Nothing you can do. Nothing anybody can do,” Sandall said and put his hand on the doorknob. “But just out of curiosity, where is he now, this Holman fellow?”

“Gone,” Bysong said. “Gone back to Hartington a lil’ richer than the rest of us.”

* * * *

The village of Hartington was seated in Cedar County on the South Dakota border. A tiny glob of one-story buildings on Main Street in the middle of endless hayfields and sheep ranches: one baseball diamond, a six-lane bowling alley, county fairgrounds, a filling station with two pumps, and a whole lot of flat. Sixteen miles from town, past county lane number four where sunflowers grew as tall as teenagers along the roadside, a single whitewood farmhouse stood next to a clump of honey locust trees, home to the Holman family. They raised hogs and grew alfalfa. Some good panfishing in the splits of streams that ran along their property, narrow enough a person could step across from one bank to the other.

In the fall, as it was five months earlier when a glittering Chevy sedan came rushing down the county lane, a pheasant hunter could get his Ringneck limit in a day’s shooting. But amidst the dust and rusted mailboxes and clover fields and cream-colored flowers, the presence of a such a fine and freshly-painted automobile speeding down the gravel was an aberration to all those who called Hartington home.
When the driver of the Chevy, Howard Nesselhous, stopped at the filling station on Main Street to get directions to the Holman farm, folks came outside just to get a glimpse of the vehicle parked next to one of the gasoline pumps.

“Reckon somebody died,” one man seated in a chair in front of the station said, mistaking the gigantic sedan for a hearse.

After conversing with the counter clerk, filling his tank, and purchasing a cherry soda, Howard was back at the wheel and hurtling west on a one-lane road towards the lonely farm of Larry Holman. Parking in the long driveway, he slammed his door shut with force. His tie whipped in a swirling breeze. He pressed his hat down on his head to keep it from blowing off to Sioux City. After entering the screened porch and rapping on the front door, he was greeted by Larry’s wife, Margaret.

“Afternoon, ma’am,” Howard said, removing his tan fedora and holding it over his heart. “Is your husband in?”

“He’s in the back washing up for supper.”

“I was hoping I might have word with him. Wouldn’t take but a minute.”

“What’s this all about?” Margaret asked.

Howard reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out a neat stack of money. “A little business proposition.”

Margaret considered the money. “You’re from the court, aren’t you? All this jury selection nonsense?”

“No ma’am, I’m not from any court,” Howard said and didn’t need to say more as the woman opened the door and led him to the kitchen.
“Well, we wouldn’t be no good if we didn’t at least invite you to stay for supper. We’re having roast chicken and corn on the cob.”

Howard wiped his forehead, took a seat at the table next to the scullery, crossed his legs, snapped open a lighter and ignited a brown cigarette as Margaret called out for her husband. She then offered Howard coffee, which he accepted with a hearty: “Appreciate it greatly, Mrs.”

A minute later, Larry Holman--selected as juror number seven just two days earlier--appeared from the back of the house, drying his hands with a frayed towel. He asked his wife to give him some privacy with the man.

“This is some beautiful country up here,” Howard said when the two men were alone at the kitchen table. Every window in the house was open to let in the October sunshine. The afternoon breeze billowed the lace curtains, stirred the wind chimes gently on the porch. “Yes sir. All golden skies as far as the eye can see.”

“It’s clean living,” Larry replied.

“Care for a cigarette? Come all the way over from Egypt. Good Turkish tobacco,” Howard said and held out his pack.

Larry took two, putting one his mouth and another behind his ear. As soon as the cigarettes were accepted, young Nesselhous knew it was true. They had their man.

“Your wife was kind enough to invite me for supper but I don’t want to barge in on your family’s meal. Nothing more awkward than a perfect stranger coming inside your home to eat off your table. So I’ll be quick to the point. Come the start of next week, you’ll be sitting in a courtroom a hundred and fifty miles downstate. And do you know what you get paid for that service? Two dollars a week. Plus room and board. And this coming at the start of October? You got harvest to worry about?”
“We raise hogs.”

“And you could be gone a long while. Papers say the trial could last a couple months, maybe more. You might not even be back in time for the holidays. Your wife and son having to come down to Omaha to open presents and eat your Christmas ham in a dinky little hotel room. Well, that ain’t worth hardly any amount of money, especially a lousy two bucks a week.”

“It’s my civic duty,” Larry said plainly.

“That it is, that it is,” Howard said, waving his cigarette around in the air. “But you’re depression poor and civic duty be damned if you got to struggle just to make ends meet. I may be a big city bum to you and you might hate the way I come up here in a big old fancy car and chalk-stripe suit, but one thing I can do for you is help pad what the state plans on paying you.”

Larry leaned back in his chair.

Howard smiled. He hadn’t been kicked out of the house yet. “You a drinking man, Mr. Holman?”

“I don’t favor it, but I ain’t got nothing against those who do.”

“Well, you’re smart. You see, what the hell does it matter to anyone else who drinks and who don’t? Especially not those who do it in some big city--”

“How much?” Larry interrupted.

Howard took the money he’d shown Larry’s wife out of his pocket again and tossed it casually on the table. “Two-thousand dollars.”

“For what?”

“For your assurance that no matter what you hear in that little courthouse come next Monday and forever after, you side with the defense.”

“For that Dennison feller?”
“That’s right.” Howard smiled. “For that Dennison feller.”

A little more than two months later, once the mistrial was declared and the jury sent home, Larry Holman returned to his farm after hitchhiking his way back from Omaha. He hadn’t telephoned to tell his wife where he was or how he was traveling. When he finally stumbled into the house, drenched and freezing, she was startled to find him in such a condition. For nearly fifty miles he’d ridden in the back of a flatbed truck, exposed to the wind and sleet. Thirty other miles he’d walked by himself on the shoulder of the road until he was finally picked up by a kindly cattle rancher on his way to Vermillion and driven the rest of the way north. He flung off his boots and peeled away his socks. The cotton was crunchy with ice. His toes were nearly black from frostbite. Margaret filled a deep enamel pot with water boiled on the gas cooktop for his feet. He asked for a drink of water and she filled a jelly jar from under the tap. He drained it all in one lung gulp and asked for another. His toes were coming alive again in the boiling pan. The pain of the thawing was worse than the freezing.

After some time, he looked up at his wife, took her hands in his and, continually shaking his head in surprise, said: “I’d never thought I’d make it out of there alive. I was sure I’d get shot as soon as I left that courthouse. I surely did. Lord in heaven, I thought I was a dead man.”

* * *

Fourteen months later and sixteen hundred miles west: a cobalt blue Lincoln V8 Victoria whipped south along Seacoast Drive in Chula Vista, California, three miles from the Mexican border. Monstrous in length, the Lincoln had quite the nose--its engine hood accounting for half of the entire body--and running boards that curled up into fenders over the front tires like giant
tongues. Tucked into the backseat, dressed in a melon-colored sport shirt with breast pockets on each side, was the retired and permanently vacationing Tom Dennison.

His first halcyon winter and honeyed summer away from Omaha in forty years being spent in Villa Six of the Hotel del Coronado, a wooden Victorian on the beachfront of San Diego Bay. Half of his estate--nearly six million dollars--was bequeathed to his daughter Francis and his two grandchildren, plus his Gold Coast Tudor. The rest of their days exhausted with luxurious but pedestrian fashion in the footpads of his Middle America.

Behind the wheel of the Lincoln was an ex-infantry man with a tight crew cut under a gray chauffer’s cap. Kicked out of the army for reasons he never discussed, Tom hired the discharged private his first week in town after reading about him in the sheriff’s inmate log on page eleven the *Bingo Bungle* newspaper. He’d been caught traveling at seventy-six miles an hour by a speed trap on state route 125. Flagging a taxi for the San Diego county jail, Tom paid his seven-hundred-dollar bond plus the price of his speeding ticket and handed him the keys to his new Lincoln.

Midday now, the thinnest part of February, 1934. The blue Victoria came to a halt for a stoplight at the intersection of Daisy Avenue by Dunes Park. Tom coughed dryly as he shuffled through the pages of the *Imperial Beach Eagle* and a daily racing form. Methodical as always, every day he left his villa early to cross the border into Tijuana and ensure arrival at the Agua Caliente Racetrack before first post. Horses in the afternoon, greyhounds in the evening. Seated in the nosebleeds of the grandstand where the crowd thinned, a pair of heavy binoculars dangled from his neck like an albatross. He wagered only small, two-dollar across-the-board bets. Sometimes put a ten spot on a quinela or a six-furlong. Lunch always purchased from an umbrella cart by the tote board: two bottles of Mexican pineapple soda, beef sandwiches.
In the evenings, driven back north again, zooming through the avenues of Zona Norte: bone white skies, mud streets, tangerines arranged on sidewalk shelves like eggs in a carton, standing girls in the callejones, wooden shacks high up in the blue dust of the San Ysidro foothills. He smoked Domino cigarettes from the duty-free shop in a cocktail-length cigarette holder--an accessory he acquired, of all places, at the train station in Ogden, Utah, on his trip over from Omaha.

At twilight, he took long walks around the Coronado’s courtyard. Past the clay tennis courts and ostrich farm, long swipes of citrus groves and celery fields. Sometimes he strolled barefoot along the beach, shoes in hand. Jackrabbits and coyotes often appeared in the wild grasses that grew in the sand all the way to the waterline. Flocks of fruit bats with the wing spans of sea birds sailed under the red clouds of dusk, leaving their canyon nests for the fronds of queen palms. Earth’s shadow formed a dark band over the gray sea. Come nightfall, a dinner of cucumber sandwiches or scallops on a bed of banana leaves in the Japanese tea garden and the light news on the back pages of the Beach Eagle--a great white sighting in fifteen foot waters, a painted cow parade next Saturday. Before bed, a long soak in a stone bathtub filled with peach water and telephone call home to wish his grandchildren goodnight, bowl-deep ashtray balanced on the rim on the tub.

Currently, still stopped on Daisy Avenue which ran parallel to the ocean, Tom looked up from his racing form and asked his driver who he liked for the noon handicap, Zippity Doodah on the rail post or Kiss and Tell in slot seven?

Waiting for the light to change, his chauffer replied without looking back, “Kiss and Tell sounds like a filly, but I’d never take a horse on the rail.”
Tom tossed the race card onto the empty seat next to him. “Suppose I just bet a couple bucks on both.”

“Suppose you do,” the driver said and had his foot on the accelerator as soon as the stoplight turned.

As the car crossed the intersection, an old mail truck with a Model A chassis and reinforced grille guard revved down Palm street and slammed into the Lincoln without warning. There was the crunching sound of gravel and the hard skid of metal. Tom’s driver hit the brakes the second before impact and the car fishtailed off the road onto the sand of Dunes Park with a flurry of dust. Headlamps and fog lights shattered, the passenger side doors of the Lincoln crumpled like an accordion, and it nearly tipped over onto its side. Tom was thrown against the backseat window, an explosion of glass pebbled like shrapnel into the left side of his face. A gash the size of a stab wound ripped through his neck. The gray cloth interior was slashed with blood. More glass from the rear window was littered in his lap. Radiator steam mixed with the sand that had been kicked up by the tires. The driver’s head fell against the steering column and the horn sounded continually like a siren.

The paneled mail truck--virtually untouched from the accident--backed up and pulled alongside the Lincoln in the sand. Three colored men jumped out of the back carriage without shutting the doors and fired a barrage of bullets into the Lincoln as the motor continued to run.

Armed with spring-powered carbines, the three negroes unloaded more than forty rounds in less than half a minute. Two of them paused to reload and emptied their chambers again, more concerned with volume than accuracy. The windscreen glass popped, the car doors were unhinged with bullet holes, tires deflated and sank down onto their hubcaps. Tom’s driver moaned and gurgled blood, his head falling off the car horn and landing softly on the passenger
seat as if changing positions in the middle of a deep sleep. Tom took the brunt of the gunshots in his arm and legs. His right foot dangled out of the back passenger door as he attempted to escape but couldn’t lift himself out of his seat.

Moving around to the right side of the Lincoln, two of the men pulled his body out of the car. They drug it onto the beach fifteen feet away from the wreckage and threw him down in the sand, on his back. He’d been shot five times in his right arm, twice in his right leg. The left side of his face was blanketed with so much powdered glass it looked charred. His eyes were open and a foam of blood rose out of his mouth, ran down his cheeks. As the three negroes stood around him, arms slack at their sides, Tom held his hand out to one of them and tried murmur his name.

The negro who Tom recognized walked back to the mail truck and retrieved a hallow metal pipe the length of a baseball bat. He took one last look at Tom and belted the side of his head with a swift whack, collapsing half of his skull. The second crack shattered his jaw in two places. The negro then lifted the pipe for a third time, ready to strike one more blow. Instead he dropped it in the sand. Quickly, all three men were back in the mail truck and fled the scene as Tom heaved and curled his hands into tiny balls. His blood dried up in the gray sand as quickly as if it were absorbed by a sponge. Seagulls circled overhead. The high tide was combing the beach flat. The sun and the moon were both in the sky.
Epilogue: The Day of the Dennisons is Past

Two days before Tom Dennison’s body was brought back to Omaha for his funeral at St. Peter’s, the cause of his death ruled a cerebral hemorrhage from a fatal auto accident, the Omaha World Herald ran a pair of articles encapsulating the life of the man who had been the city’s chief political figure for forty years.

The first editorial, published on Thursday, February 15, 1934, read in part:

A Dakota county farm boy who became a prospector in Colorado and then a gambler, Tom Dennison was a genius at political organization. His power was doubtless exaggerated both by his friends and enemies….Opponents pictured him ruling the city in his own interest, permitting gambling, bootlegging and other vices to flourish and send money into his pockets. Some of his followers praised him extravagantly and pointed to his many philanthropies as evidence of his warm-heartedness.

Elmer Thomas…said of him: “He was the most powerful man of his type in the United States. His executive ability and qualities of leadership placed him head and shoulders above his kind. He was known in every big city in the country.” Dennison always credited “reformers” with being largely instrumental in keeping him in the limelight and in his position of leadership. They gave him credit, he said, for winning elections whether or not he was responsible, and people generally believed them.

…Accusations always rolled off Dennison like water from a duck’s back. He professed no concern about what people thought of him. One of his ideas of a joke was to
purposefully give a false impression so the “reformers would have something to talk about.”

…In appearance Dennison was a man to attract a second look. Large and powerful in frame, he always was immaculately dressed and his diamonds were large and flawless. His features were of the “hard” type, with cold, penetrating eyes that never changed expression. His mouth habitually was closely compressed, but always at the corners a smile played.

The second article, buried deep on page twenty-six of the evening edition, came the day after the first--February 16, 1932:

Chancellor Dollfuss, over in Austria, as a penniless and friendless country boy was befriended by a parish priest who recognized his good qualities and wanted to make a man of him. His name is now on the lips of all the world. One wonders what might have been the result had Tom Dennison, when he struck out alone into the world at the age of 14, had the good fortune to encounter a similar benefactor.

His fate was quite the opposite. He drifted west and became a graduate of the rowdy bars and gambling halls of the roaring mining camps of an earlier day. He then established himself as a master gambler in Omaha. That calling led him into the dirty game of practical city politics that involved long and intimate underworld contacts and an underworld leadership. And such, until near the end of activities, was his life.

There were the makings of quite another sort of man, and quite another sort of life, in Tom Dennison. Everyone who knew him recognized it, and that recognition
explains the friends he won and held despite his calling and reputation. Under the drift and dross deposited by the long years of the kind of life he led there lived still sterling qualities, traits that were admirable.

It is regrettable there was no good parish priest to take Tom Dennison in hand when he was an ignorant country boy adventuring into a hard world in the fight for survival. He had a stalwart, sturdy frame. He had a keen and inquiring and vigorous mind. He had courage. He had inborn the qualities of sympathy and compassion. He had, too, the qualities of natural leadership, of the fighter, and he was industrious and persevering. Though he had little or no education, no schooling, these qualities served to make him the man he was, notwithstanding he had chosen the hardest, thorniest, most dismal and corrupting path and followed it to the end.

Suppose he had been directed into a better path to a better end. Suppose he had been given the training of the schools and universities, had caught from them or elsewhere the inspiration to a life of honorable and useful service. It is hard to conjecture what Tom Dennison might have become, what he might have done, but our guess is that he would have gone far and won for himself a deservedly honored name.

“De mortuis nil nisi bonum” is a good and merciful rule. But the day of the Tom Dennisons in our civic life one hopes is passing fast. It is charitable to say, and there is some truth in it, that they were the products of their environment. Some of them were “sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh.” It is in some such way we think of Omaha’s one-time “boss” now gone to his rest. He loved horses, he loved dogs, he loved children, he was friendly and companionable, his heart and pocket responded quickly to a cry of distress. These, to a somewhat remarkable extent, were the qualities of his kind. In the
arid desert of his life, where so much was parched and hot, they brought some lovely buds to blossom. In the minds of a good many the memory of them will serve to temper harsh judgment.

After he was laid to rest in Forest Lawn Cemetery next to his first wife, Sue Anne, and his infant son, Omaha was quick to move on from its days of machine politics and organized crime. In the coming century, it would be well known as one of the most polite and peaceful cities of its size in the entire nation. Yet, as much as cities of any size are a congestion of buildings and businesses, of streets and sidewalks, they are all the more a collective consciousness of the people who call them home. And, perhaps more than anything else, their histories are remembered best for what they would like to forget the most. If silence is the sternest measure of human judgment, the absence of Dennison’s name from Omaha is perhaps the most revealing perception of the man who forever altered its course.

Still, other figures from those Dennison Days during the first thirty years of the twentieth century found their names living on in the city. For Edward Rosewater, the Rosewater School in South Omaha lasted for seventy-five years before being turned into the Rosewater Apartments. Mayor Dahlman has both a neighborhood and park that bear his name. The Harry Buford House is considered an Omaha landmark and the Broomfield Rowhouse is a member of the National Register of Historic Places.

Orville Menard, in his book “Political Bossism in Mid-America”, said this of Dennison’s lasting but spectral influence:

“Thomas Dennison ran a quintessential political machine, one with an enduring legacy. One seeking to understand contemporary Omaha’s political institutions need search little further
than the Dennison years, for to examine those years is to learn that what was hitherto taken for granted merely because it was there is transformed into a consequence of our heritage…

“Every time an Omahan deals with a city or county civil servant who is under the merit system, reads about or participates in the bidding system for city contracts and construction, or registers and casts a secret ballot, the “Old Man” is alongside. Even though many in the city have never heard of him, Tom Dennison is a part of their lives because he is part of their city’s past…For Dennison there are neither streets, parks, schools, nor private enterprises. Cities are not wont to grant public recognition to bosses who ruled from behind the mayor’s chair rather than in it. He founded no company to carry on his entrepreneurial spirit because his business was politics and his heritage must be sought in that domain. No buildings or statues for the “Old Man”, but his monuments, sculpted by reformers, are in our political processes.”

But to understand the totality of any life, one must first go back to the beginning. Born into the life of a farm boy in Delaware county, Iowa, Dennison had been many things in the years before his arrival in the city he would finally call home: a woodchopper in Utah and Montana, a silver prospector in Mexico, a floorman and gambler in Colorado, even a county champion corn husker at the age of fourteen on the Simpson Finnell farm in Mills County.

Forsaking it all, he left his quarter interest in two gambling halls in Leadville to venture onto a city he hardly knew, only having lived there briefly as a young boy. Two days before he arrived in Omaha, two days before shaking hands with Edward Rosewater and perhaps only thinking of the city as another brief stop in his nomadic wayfaring, he first set up camp with his friend Soapy Farrell along a tiny sliver of forded brook ten miles from the Nebraska border.

He got a small fire rolling with the flint and charcloth from his tinderbox. Soapy shaved with the same blade he’d stuck in the musician’s belly on the train after wiping it clean. They
refilled their canisters and jugs from the clear stream. Tom dried his wool socks by draping them on the end of stick and held them above the fire like bait on a fishing line. For dinner they munched on wafers wrapped in wax paper and sardines packed with peppers. Throughout the day they’d followed the rail tracks loosely after fleeing the train, staying about a quarter mile out of sight. According to their wrinkled section of map, Sulfur Springs--the next railroad junction just before the Nebraska border--wasn’t more than five miles away. They’d be in town by noon tomorrow.

After replacing his socks on his feet, Tom bent his face into the brook and splashed water over the back of his neck. He pawed up more water into his hair until it was saturated and sat back down in front of the fire, dripping.

“I’m real sorry about all that back on the train,” Soapy said. “Still, things seemed to have worked alright. We can meet back up with the tracks in Sulfur.”

“It wasn’t long ago that men used to pan streams like this for placer gold,” Tom replied, ignoring the apology.

Soapy lay down on his back with his hands behind his head and stared up at the stars. “Still do. Some of them hard cases, anyways. Anymore they say the only gold left in this country is black. I was thinking of heading down to Louisiana or Texas or maybe even California and get me set up in the oil business. Work on a derrick for a couple years, save up until I can start one of my own. More oil than water down there. And no winters either. Three hundred days of summer a year down there, they say.”

“And what of your pop’s furniture store?”
“Reckon I sell it in the first year or so. Never was much of a retail man, myself. Peddling armchairs and describing the difference between wicker and maple to folks ain’t exactly my long end of a dream. What about you? You say you got some prospects in Omaha, have you?”

“One prospect. Not too sure of what it is myself. Don’t believe it’s much more than a muscle job of some kind. Some high and mighty newspaperman who’s friends with Fred was asking him if he knew of anyone interested in that sort of thing.”

“Omaha,” Soapy said. “Ain’t never been there myself. You?”

“Long years ago. When I was just a boy.”

“What’s it all about?”

“I hear it’s a wide open town,” Tom said, scooping up more water from the stream into his hair to cool his head. “A city on the rise.”
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