

*SNAKES
CAN'T RUN*

ED LIN



MINOTAUR BOOKS

A THOMAS DUNNE BOOK

NEW YORK



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS FOR MINOTAUR BOOKS.
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For my grand parents

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Man's nature is evil; goodness is the result of conscious activity.
—Xunzi (c. 312 B.C.E.–?)

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August 1, 1976

TO THE NOTICE OF NOBODY IN CHINATOWN, MY PARTNER AND I climbed out of a manhole on Bayard Street close to the intersection with Mulberry. It was the third storm drain section we had checked out that day.

I sat on the back bumper of our Con Ed truck and Vandyne joined me there after pulling out two cold cans of Coke from the cooler in the front seat. I wiped off the Tiger Balm from my upper lip and nose onto my sleeve. We were smelly and exhausted. Ghosts swam by in the humidity.

We pulled the tabs off our Cokes and flipped them into the open manhole.

“I feel like I just climbed out of the *Poseidon*,” I said.

“I remember seeing white girls in shorts climbing ladders, but I don’t remember any of the Chinese people making it out,” said Vandyne.

“I would have followed Gene Hackman. He was in *The French Connection*. He knew his stuff.”

“That was an okay movie. But considering the number of shafts there were in *The Poseidon Adventure*, how come Shaft wasn’t in it?”

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"I'm sure he was holed up somewhere with some lady."

I wiped my forehead with the cold soda can. I pointed to the open manhole.

"What do you think?" I asked Vandyne.

He shrugged. "How about we close up and take the truck back? We'll talk in the truck."

"Let's do that."

We finished our sodas and chucked the cans into the open manhole. They made no sound.

"Hey, Chow, can you get that cover back on?" Vandyne asked.

"Why me?"

"Because you're good at it and I have seniority."

"Is this in my job description?"

"Just remember one thing, partner. You signed yourself up for these assignments. You wanted it."

I folded up the orange gate that had blocked off traffic and put it in the truck. Then I grabbed a crowbar and dragged the manhole cover back on. The late-summer sun reflected off a windshield directly into my eyes and I had to keep my head down.

I threw the crowbar into the back of the truck and slammed the door shut. Vandyne started up the engine before I jumped in on the passenger side. I reached over and cranked up the AC.

"That starts blowing cool pretty quick," said Vandyne. We wound our windows up.

"There were people down there," I said. "Maybe like a week ago, judging by the footprints and other garbage."

"You're right. Probably twenty people."

We both had field experience in Vietnam. Even though we had been back to the World for four years, our memories were still fresh. Too fresh.

"But no shells, no bodies, no blood," I said.

"The tourists said they heard gunshots and yelling coming from the gutter."

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"Maybe it was kids who were lighting up firecrackers and dropping them down there."

"Personally," said Vandyne slowly, "the worst thing I saw down there was all the congealed grease lying around. Made me think about fat clogging arteries."

"All those Chinatown restaurants have to pour their crap out somewhere. Why not down the gutter? It's right there and you don't even have to pay someone to dispose of it."

There was a loud honking behind us. A noodle truck didn't have enough room to squeeze by. The guy in the passenger seat stuck his head out and saw in my side mirror that I was Chinese. He jumped out and charged up to my window.

I cranked the window down so he could yell at me.

"You guys are the worst!" he started. "Lazy! Stupid! Greedy! You keep raising your rates and now you want to take over the streets, too! Get out of my way, already, or is the black boy too stupid to know how to drive?"

I looked down at my reflective orange vest and my Con Ed patch. I pushed back my hard hat and said, "Eat shit, fuckface."

Vandyne eased the truck away from the curb. "What happened?" he asked me.

"He lost his cat. I told him where to find it."

Vandyne smirked.

We went through a police checkpoint before getting onto the Brooklyn Bridge. A cop came up to the window. He looked in at both of us, nodded, and waved us through.

I leaned back in the passenger's seat and turned to Vandyne.

"I never thought New York would see so much terrorism," I said.

"Me and you both."

The latest bombing by the group FALN, which sought independence for Puerto Rico from the United States, had blown up a phone booth outside of 1 Police Plaza. Two people were lightly injured, but the

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indignity of having a bomb go off right under our headquarters lit a fire under the ass of the NYPD in general and the Fifth Precinct in particular, because it happened inside our boundaries. All precinct detectives were dispatched full-time on destroying the FALN except for Vandyne, who was the least senior detective, and me, because I was only on detective track. Unlike Vandyne, I didn't have the gold shield yet. I was Encyclopedia Brown with a gun.

"Terrorists only harm their own causes and shame their own people," said Vandyne.

"We'll get those sons of bitches," I said.

I picked up the Chinese papers from the floor.

The Communist-biased newspaper had an editorial about how U.S. Representatives John Young, Wayne Hays, and Allan T. Howe—all recently embroiled in separate sex scandals—were emblematic of a corrupt capitalist society ready to collapse shortly after turning two hundred years old.

The Hong Kong-biased newspaper congratulated Trinidad and Tobago on gaining independence and joining the Commonwealth.

"Anything good?" asked Vandyne.

"Naw," I said. I put an eight-track of *Innervisions* into the player.

"Normally, I don't like synthesizers," Vandyne said. "But this is all right."

"This is what Stevie hears in his head," I said.

For a year, from 1974 to 1975, Vandyne and I were partnered in a sector car for the Fifth Precinct. I could not have asked to be paired up with a better person—a fellow Vietnam vet and someone else who had also killed a little boy there.

Then right before the layoffs and cutbacks from the city's financial crisis kicked in, we lost our car. Vandyne picked up investigative assignments while they had stuck me on a footpost.

They also made me attend community functions in Chinatown so when the pictures came out in the Chinese newspapers there was me in

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a uniform saying, "See, the NYPD actually hired one of you people!" They were putting the one Chinese cop they had in the most visible position possible.

Sitting at these dinner events depressed me even more because as much as the NYPD was using me to establish legitimacy with the Chinese, the various community leaders were using me to boost their own profiles in Chinatown.

I drank until I forgot everything: frustrations with the job, jealousy that Vandyne was getting ahead, Nam flashbacks. But when I woke up and remembered again, it was always worse.

That was all behind me now, but I still shuddered when I thought about those days.

I folded up the Chinese newspapers and shoved them into my right armpit.

We showered in the Con Ed employee facilities.

"I can't believe how clean this place is," I said. "They give you clean towels, soap, and shampoo."

"We're in the wrong line of work, partner," said Vandyne.

"It's like a country club."

"This is no country club! I bused tables at a country club one summer outside Philly."

"What was it like working for the man?"

"Well, the worst tippers were the Chinese people."

"Chinese people don't join country clubs!"

"I think one of them was named 'Robert Chow.'"

"See, there you go. 'Robert Chow' is not a Chinese name."

"It's not?"

"No. It's an American name."

We got back into our street clothes. Vandyne dressed in khakis, a dark blue buttoned shirt, and a Mets hat. I had on a pair of jeans and a rugby-styled shirt that my girlfriend had paid way too much money for.

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We went into the underground parking and got into the unmarked car.

“So very recently there were about twenty people down there,” I started.

“The information we got was good.”

“The information was old. Where are those people now?”

“The smugglers must have moved them.”

“One other possibility,” I suggested, “is that those people could have settled their debts all at once and been released. But that’s not a likely scenario.”

“What else could have happened?”

“The only possibilities are that they paid up, were moved, or were killed.”

“Well, they weren’t killed. I don’t think they’ve paid up. So where have they been moved to?”

“That’s today’s bonus question.”

“These people who get smuggled in, what keeps them going to work and coming home to the safe house?”

“Chinese people freak out about settling debts. It’s shameful to have one, no matter how evil the lender is. Besides, if they tried to run away, they’d probably be killed.”

“How much is the smuggling fee?”

“Several thousand dollars.”

“Several *thousand!*” exclaimed Vandyne. “That’s a lot of money to just see the Statue of Liberty.”

“You have to give it to the illegals, they’re the huddled masses. From what I’ve read in the Chinese newspapers, smugglers can even charge ten grand per person.”

“How badly could you want in on this country?”

“You know what it’s like being stuck in Asia, Vandyne. When you were in Nam, what would you have paid to come back?”

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"Wouldn't have paid nothing. A ride back was the very least they owed me. A ride back on a *plane*."

"These people are paying smugglers a thousand-dollar deposit for a ride in a freight container from Hong Kong or Taiwan to San Francisco and then a train across the country and finally a bus or truck to New York City. Then they're basically prisoners until they pay off their debt in a sweatshop, factory, or prors house."

"How long does it take to work off nine thousand dollars?"

"A couple years. More if they lie to you."

We watched two Con Ed trucks drive into the garage and park. The workers shambled out.

"I have a new respect for these guys," said Vandyne. "Who else would be willing to put in forty hours a week down in hell?"

"Yeah, let's think about that when we're writing the monthly check for the next rate hike," I said.

We checked the shields in our wallets and our guns.

"Time to get you to the store, right?" asked Vandyne as he started up the car.

"Highlight of my day," I said.

I kind of meant it, too. Ever since the midget bought the toy store and hired my roommate, Paul, to work there, I had been dropping by informally for the last half hour or so that the store was open. It gave people in the neighborhood a chance to talk to someone in law enforcement without stepping into the police station.

Chinese people are far too superstitious for their own good. They think that if you go see the doctor for a checkup, you'll get cancer. If you buy life insurance, you're going to die. If you visit a police station—for any reason—you'll be thrown in jail.

I'll never understand how people from the great civilization that advanced humankind with the inventions of paper, gunpowder, and chow fun could still harbor so many stupid ideas.

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When I walked into the toy store on Mulberry Street, the midget was dealing with a kid who couldn't make up his mind over which kung fu model he wanted. The midget was wearing a collared shirt and had his shirtsleeves rolled up, exposing surprisingly muscular biceps. His combed and side-parted hair was shiny like licked black licorice and he kept his face unshaven I think to distinguish himself from his customers.

The midget's half-closed eyes regarded the boy at the counter with bemusement and annoyance.

The kid was chubby and you could see that at some point, maybe a few days ago, he had smeared his Fudgsicle-covered fingers across his Shazam! T-shirt. His watery eyes were contemplating two figures in the case behind the cash register. He sucked in his upper lip and spat it out a few times.

"Which one is better?" he asked the midget. "The guy throwing a punch or the guy with one leg up?"

"Honestly, they're both exactly the same, kid," said the midget. He saw me and winked.

"They're doing different things, how can they be the same?"

"They both cost me the same price, they'll cost you the same price, and I'll get the same amount of profit on either one. There's no difference."

"They look different!"

"People look different, too. But they're also all the same."

I went down an aisle that featured paints and balsa-wood sheets and sat on a step stool in the back corner. I nodded to the kid with the broom sweeping up. He grunted something.

I had worked at the toy store after I had come back from Nam and didn't know what the hell I was doing. I was an old friend of the prior owner. But how the midget came to own the store is too complicated to get into now. In other words, it's a story in which I don't come out looking too good.

I tightened my right shoelace and by the time I put my foot down the first person of the night was at my side.

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She was an older woman with pinched-in cheeks and a dry crust of a mouth.

"Detective Chow," she started.

"Just call me Robert here," I said. I got tired of explaining that I was only on detective track and not actually a detective yet.

"Yes. I . . . I'm scared. I need my landlord to fix the stairs in my building. It's not safe."

"Mrs. Yung," I said. "You live on the first floor."

"It's just not safe, Robert! There are kids who live in that building!"

I touched her gnarled hand and felt a soft pulse amid the bones.

"You shouldn't be out this late," I told her. "You should be at home."

"Not you, too," she said, moving away.

Two men in their fifties wearing sagging tank tops came up next, looking as glum as the bratty kids they used to be.

"Officer Chow, this guy stole my watch!" the bigger one said.

"Nope," said the other, who had his hands in his pockets past the wrists. "You lost it in a poker game."

"But I need that watch! I can't work properly if I can't keep track of time."

"Should have thought about that before putting it into the pot."

"Can I see the watch?" I asked.

The smaller guy sighed and pulled out his hands. One wrist had on a cheap wristwatch with a fake leather band. His other hand held on to a Timex with a steel stretch band.

"You're keeping his Timex even though it doesn't fit you?" I asked him.

"No, because he's so fat," the smaller guy said.

"I got muscles in my wrists!" said the bigger man.

"Look, how much money are we talking about?" I asked.

"Five dollars," the bigger man said. The other guy nodded.

"Just give him his watch. He'll still pay you the lousy five bucks, all right?"

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"It's not right," the smaller man grumbled, although he handed over the watch.

"Hey," said the bigger man. "It's not wound up! It was running when I gave it to you! Officer Chow, make him wind it for me!"

"Wind it yourself!" I said. "You've got muscles in your wrists, right?"

They both walked off muttering and I wondered why I bothered to do this until a young woman walked up.

Her eyebrows were thin and yet incredibly bold above two black satin eyes. She had a pixelike expression that was blissfully unaware of her own beauty, except for her mouth, which was twisted a bit to one side.

"Is the madness over yet?" she asked.

"For tonight, yes, I think," I said. "How was your day, Lonnie?"

"Very, very tiring." She put out an elbow and slumped against a rack of comic books.

"Hey, Sis!" yelled Paul, putting his broom aside. "Don't wrinkle those comic books!"

Lonnie straightened up and held out a paper bag to Paul. "Gee, I guess you don't really want these leftover pastries, then, huh?"

"Aw, I'll take it," said Paul, grabbing it.

"More studying tonight?" I asked Lonnie. I stood up and kissed her on the cheek. Chinese people aren't very affectionate in public. They don't even hold hands in the street, though that's also because the sidewalks in Chinatown are too narrow to go down side by side.

"I still have to finish that book about mass media," she groaned. I didn't know how she worked her day job as a low-level manager at Martha's Bakery and still studied at night. Actually, I never really knew how people studied at all. But hey, I made it through high school without trying too hard.

I got up and walked out with Lonnie, intending to see her to her parents' door. "Paul," I said, "I expect to see you back at the apartment soon."

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"Don't worry about me, man!" he said, leaning on his broom. If that kid weren't a genius, I would have straightened him out by now for that attitude of his. I had to face facts, though. That kid was going to be a sophomore in high school and was already way smarter than me. Paul was living with me because his dad, who was also Lonnie's dad, had been beating him. He had also been hanging out with wannabe gangsters in the streets. Lonnie's stepmother was Paul's mom.

The midget had his head down and was writing something on a shipping receipt. "See you two later," he said without looking up.

As soon as we were on the street, a spry old man grabbed my shoulder.

"Robert Chow," he said, "I'm so sorry, I tried to get here sooner."

"Hey, that's all right," I said.

"Do you remember me?" he said. The man was dressed in a tan linen suit and fancy penny loafers that should probably be holding quarters. His beard and mustache were trimmed cleanly. His tan cap was probably covering mostly bare scalp.

"I don't know who you are," I said.

"I'm Mr. Tin. It's 'T'ien' in Mandarin, but you knew me as 'Tin.' You went to school with my son Don."

I felt one of my hands tighten into a fist.

"Sure," I said. "I remember you and Don."

"Well, he's been having problems, Robert. Could you please just go talk to him? Ever since he came back from Vietnam a few years ago, he's had trouble readjusting. We've had him at our home upstate, but things haven't been working out. I got him a place back in Chinatown, hoping that being back in the Cantonese environment would help, but, well, we haven't heard from him in a few weeks."

I looked into Mr. Tin's eyes. I remembered him as the furious dad who pulled me off of Don's moped even though he said I could ride it. Now he looked tired and in need of help.

"You basically want me to check in on him, right?" I asked.

"Yes, that's it."

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"Have you gone to the apartment?"

"Yes, just now. I have the keys, but the door is chain-locked. I hear him moving around in there, though. Maybe because of your common experience, he would be more amenable to seeing you."

"Sure, I'll go."

"Here is the address," said Mr. Tin, handing me a card while flashing a look of concern at Lonnie.

"Pardon my manners, Mr. Tin, this is my girlfriend, Lonnie."

"How are you, Mr. Tin?" she asked.

He smiled. "Very, very pretty!" was all he could say.

"This is your phone number on the back?" I asked Mr. Tin.

"Yes. If I'm not there, leave your name with the secretary, but don't say any more."

"I'm on my way," I told him.

He tipped his cap at me and then at Lonnie. A black sedan pulled out from the curb and a rear door opened. Mr. Tin stepped inside and the car tore away.

"Were you friends with his son?" asked Lonnie.

"I was. Sure I was."

"You don't sound like you were."

"The thing about Don was that he was the richest kid in class. He was a nice kid, but he got a lot of breaks in life."

"You sound jealous."

"Yeah, I was." Especially after my first girlfriend, Barbara, left me for him.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"Oh, no. I've got this one. This is guy talk."

"Did you see him in Vietnam?"

"No, I didn't. He was discharged early for some reason. He wasn't even wounded. I think his father pulled some strings."

"His father is that influential?"

"Lonnie, his dad is officially a representative in the Kuomintang

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government. You know—the KMT. He flies back to Taiwan to vote a few times every year.”

“He doesn’t even live in Taiwan. How can he be a representative?”

“He’s actually supposed to represent a district in China that the KMT hasn’t controlled since they lost the civil war in 1949.”

“He lives in America and legislates in Taiwan for a district in China?”

“That’s it.”

“That doesn’t seem to be a real job, then, does it?”

“Anything is a real job if you get paid for it.”

A tourist would think that the KMT had won the Chinese civil war by the way their flags flew in most of Chinatown.

When the KMT lost the mainland it retreated to the tiny yam-shaped island Taiwan, also known as “Free China,” which was ironic because the people were caught in the grip of martial law. The KMT also held sway over Chinatown.

It was no secret that the KMT backed the Greater China Association, an umbrella group for Chinatown’s many smaller family and district associations. Greater China was historically the unofficial government of Chinatown, and mediated between groups and between the Chinese and New York City.

The KMT also owned the largest newspaper in Chinatown and kept a steady drumbeat of anti-Communist features and editorials. Much of the content was aimed at the small but growing community east of Bowery that was loyal to the mainland.

Together Chinese Kinship, a rival umbrella group comprised of Communist affiliates, was growing quickly. After years of enduring KMT dominance in Chinatown, these parties lashed out earlier this year. A bunch of rabble-rousers disrupted Greater China’s New Year’s Day parade with a protest urging the United States to switch diplomatic recognition to the People’s Republic from Taiwan.

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The switch was the KMT's greatest nightmare and yet it also seemed inevitable. Nixon merely shook hands with Mao, but Carter—a farmer and therefore a communist—would embrace him like a fellow pinko.

Carter was killing Ford in the polls, too, so the KMT could only root for Mao to die before Carter could be sworn in. Word was Mao was lingering on his deathbed and couldn't last much longer.

I think they needed to consider that the New York Rangers have managed to soldier on in a semiconscious state since 1940.

I walked Lonnie to the apartment where she lived with her dad and stepmother. The building entrance on the south side of Bayard Street was a battered door with sheet metal riveted over it. The ground floor storefront was a souvenir shop that made a lot of money selling cheap ching-chong crap to tourists.

I dropped her off and walked down to the forlorn Park Street address that Don's father had given me. Park Street, which is a long way from Park Avenue, is a steep one-block street between Mott and Columbus Park. Most Chinese people tried to stay off of it not only because it was a bit run-down—even by Chinatown standards—but also because it was right around the corner from three funeral homes by the park.

The ground floor of Don's apartment was the Chinese Longevity funeral home. Through the window all I could see were flowers and closed curtains. Names of the deceased were taped to the glass front door to inform potential mourners without troubling them to actually step into the home and jinx themselves.

Step into a funeral home and you'll die, they think.

I glanced at the names, admiring the calligraphy. It had been a bad week for Lees and Wongs. The building was originally a bank to serve what was then the local Italian immigrant community. The claws of a busy granite eagle clamped the arch above the funeral home's door, its steadfast gaze fixed to a faraway time and place.

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Off to the side was the building entrance to the apartments above Chinese Longevity. I pressed the button next to "2R."

I heard a crackle come over the speaker.

"Don?" I asked. "It's Robert. Robert Chow. From Seward Park High. How are you, man?"

Shards of white noise ripped through the speaker. I was about to press the button again when the door lock buzzed. I pushed my way in. The lobby smelled like fried garlic. It was a pleasant note that offset the lobby's smashed tile floor and crumbling plaster walls. Some broken pieces of furniture were neatly stacked at the side of the stairwell.

I walked up to the second floor, wondering why Don's father couldn't have gotten him a better place.

I was about to knock at 2R when Don swung the door open. He was dressed in flannel pajamas and a camouflage jacket. Don's long, lean face dripped in sweat. He obviously hadn't slept in days, yet he managed to look alert enough to drive a trailer truck cross-country.

"Don," I started. "How have you been?"

"Don't you know?" he said.

"No, I don't."

"You haven't heard about my father?"

"No."

"It's in the fucking news every day, Robert!"

I looked into his wild eyes.

"Can I come in, Don?"

"Yeah, it doesn't matter. I don't have anything to hide. Anymore."

I walked in with caution. The apartment seemed to be completely empty except for a sleeping bag on the floor.

"Robert," said Don after he closed the door. "My father is a part of a conspiracy."

"What kind?"

"He's trying to use me as the sacrificial lamb to justify invading China."

"Whoa! What do you mean?"

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“He’s trying to have me kidnapped and murdered to make it look like the Chinese Communists targeted me. They broke the news on the radio.”

“Don, you don’t seem to have a radio. Or a television.”

“I got rid of them. They had microphones hidden in them.”

“How come you don’t have any furniture, Don?”

“There are men hidden behind the walls. If you listen closely you can hear them talking. They were planning on coming in through a hole and hiding in my furniture. Then they were going to surprise me and take me away.”

I looked closely at Don. He believed every single word with all his heart. I briefly considered slapping him.

“There’s nobody behind these walls, Don.”

“Shhh. Listen.”

The only thing I heard was the creaking of the floor as I shifted my weight.

“Hear that?” he asked.

“No.”

“One guy just said, ‘Robert Chow likes to suck cock.’”

I had to call Don’s dad. This man needed help. Professional help.

“Don, I have to go right now. Can I bring you any food or anything else?”

“No,” he whispered.

“Are you taking medicine?”

“I’m taking Chinese medicine, but it makes me sleepy. I don’t like it. Robert, you have to stop the conspiracy. You have to stop my dad!”

“I will. I promise I will.” I walked out of the apartment without turning my back on him, but I didn’t go down the stairs until he closed the door and I heard his chain lock rattle into place.

I wanted to do something right away for Don. But I wasn’t a doctor, so what could I do but feel anxious? I knew a drink would have calmed me

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down right away. But I also knew a single drink would send me spiraling off into the abyss. I was an alcoholic on my third month of sobriety, three months into the rest of my life.

I walked east on East Broadway. Apart from Don, it wasn't such a bad day, considering that most of it was spent walking through shit. It was uneventful, so that made it a good day. It's not like we had found bodies or anything.

My apartment is about an eight-minute walk from Bowery, if you walk in the street to avoid the crowded sidewalk. No Chinese people lived where I did, by the southeast corner of Seward Park. It used to be a Jewish neighborhood and plenty of the elderly were still there, mixed in with Spanish-speaking immigrants. Everybody largely avoided me, for a variety of reasons, including my race, my profession, and my past instability due to alcoholism.

The slouching walk-up building that I called home was a lot nicer than anything in Chinatown. The faceless management corporation that ran it and several other buildings had lost a major court battle and made sure to maintain the cleanliness of the stairwells and spray for pests regularly.

I could tell that Paul was home already because my mail wasn't sitting on the radiator. The residents' battered wall-mounted mailboxes, most with the lids torn off, stuck out of the wall like shrapnel from an exploded bomb. They were too daunting for the mailman to deal with. He would simply slap the entire building's mail on the lobby radiator and let us sort it all out. When the heat kicked in, it was probably a major fire hazard.

I went up the four flights to my apartment. I could hear that Paul was watching the 7 P.M. American news with Walter Cronkite. I fished around my pocket change for my door keys.

Then my radio went off with the code for possible dead bodies. Found between the bridges.

I folded my arms over my head and took a deep breath. I had trudged

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through tunnels all day and had had an extremely disturbing high-school reunion. Didn't that at least call for a mandatory Yoo-Hoo break?

I looked up at the ceiling, a multicolored splatter of cracked and chipped paint with the taped leftovers of torn-down red paper ornaments from Chinese holidays past. A pattern stretched diagonally into the corner—the outline of a lopsided face, sad and bloody.

I turned around and hopped down the stairs. I got on my radio and told Dispatch I was responding now.

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BY THE TIME I GOT TO HENRY STREET UNDER THE MANHATTAN bridge overpass, one black and white and one unmarked police car were already there.

Peepshow was standing at the edge of the crime scene, twirling his baton, the one thing he could do without fucking up. “Keep moving, keep moving!” he yelled to the murmuring Chinese people. He touched his cap when he saw me. I nodded back.

Two bodies, Asian men in their twenties, lay on their sides. Both had their hands tied behind them with wire. They didn’t look fresh, and one man’s tattoo behind his ear stood out in sharp contrast to the white bloodless flesh of his neck.

I walked up to English, but before I could say anything he put a hand on my shoulder.

“These fucking bag monkeys won’t let me past the tape,” he said, pointing out the forensic team collecting samples around the bodies.

“They’re just trying to do their job right.”

“I’ll do their job for them right now. These guys died from gunshot

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wounds and the bodies were dumped here. You can analyze for blood type all you want, but you can't find the criminals looking down a microscope."

"I hear you."

"You know what solves crimes?"

"What?"

"Shoe leather. Walking around and asking questions."

"All right."

"Chow," he said, coming in closer. "You see the guy in the crowd in the red knit shirt smoking a cigarette?"

"Yeah," I said, knowing better than to look immediately.

"I don't like his face. Too smug."

"I'll follow him."

"Where's Vandyne?"

"Coming back from Queens."

"How were those drains today?"

"Some people had been down there, but there isn't anything down there now but shit and rats."

"Well, it sure beats having to pose for pictures at the Chinatown Girl Scouts banquet, doesn't it? I'd take shit and rats over that any day. I knew you would, too."

English was referring to my old footpost of walking a tame beat and making with the smiley smiles for the cameras. He used to try to wind me up just for the hell of it. But now that I was on detective track, he was my best friend in the world.

English was the nickname for Detective First Grade Thomas Sanchez. He was a light-skinned Latino who looked Italian. English was as tall as me, but he had a meaty, pockmarked face, like a raw steak after being pounded by a tenderizer. He had gotten his nickname because he didn't know how to speak Spanish despite being the son of immigrants from Puerto Rico.

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We walked away from each other without saying anything more. I glanced back at the bodies and rubbed my hands on my legs.

I crossed the street and walked until I was almost in back of the smoking guy in red. I switched my radio off.

I was about ten yards away from him, standing near a stone trestle stained with rust. He looked like he was about my age, mid-twenties, and stood at about five and a half feet. His posture was perfectly straight. That told me something. There wasn't an honest job a man could have in Chinatown that wouldn't crimp his spine by that age.

The man flicked his cigarette away and walked west. I didn't get a good look at his face until we got to Bowery. He had deep-set eyes above a thin nose that bent to his right. The chin was squat and his lower jaw was shifty. He was a hardhead and I could bet that he was packing something to make up for his relatively short stature.

A few steps above the intersection with Pell Street, a taller man peeled off the wall and seemed to cut him off in an unfriendly kind of way. But they were talking and then the smaller man slapped the other guy's back. They laughed a little and then continued north on Bowery together.

I didn't attract as much attention as I used to on this street. My old footpost in uniform included Bowery, and thousands recognized my face from my pictures in the Chinese papers. But sobriety had caused major physical changes, all for the better. My face had slimmed down and my skin reverted to a dirty ivory color. I let my hair grow out, not crazy by seventies standards, but longer than it had ever been.

In my street clothes I looked like another ABC asshole in the neighborhood for some cheap eats.

I put my hands in my pockets, stepped behind a short couple, and continued to follow the two men.

"Oh, no," I groaned to myself when I saw them swing open a door at Jade Palace, Willie Gee's restaurant at the southwest corner of Bowery and Canal Street.

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Jade Palace had settled a labor dispute earlier this year after some ugly picketing by angry waiters and a hunger strike. Willie still had it in for me because I wouldn't break up their legal protest. I walked across Bowery and watched from the other side of the street. I saw Willie in his distinctive prescription shades and black helmet of hair. He greeted the two men with an open-mouthed smile big enough for them to check his molars. Through the glass doors I could see Willie bringing them into the back of the restaurant, no doubt into the private room, and I lost sight of all of them.

I switched my radio back on. Immediately the dispatcher was calling me. I responded. Vandyne had been looking for me. I started walking south and said I'd meet him back under the bridge overpass.

They were putting the bodies into the back of an ambulance. English was sipping a cup of coffee that someone had gotten for him. He played with the tab of the plastic lid.

"That guy," I said, "went into Jade Palace with a buddy. I'm gonna follow up with Willie Gee tomorrow."

"That's good, Chow. Probably won't say shit, anyway, but why not make him sweat?"

Vandyne said, "Where are the people who reported the find?"

"Two tourists. Stopped Peepshow on his beat and brought him over to the bodies," said English. "Then they had a dinner appointment with friends."

"What kind of people find dead bodies and then go eat?" I asked.

"They're college professors. Peepshow got their business cards. They'll be coming to the Five later to make a formal statement. No one else here on the street saw anything, so this is how we're going to play it. You guys talk to the store owners in the area. They don't want to cooperate, tell them you might have to shut down the sidewalk area in front of their businesses for a while. That might make them talk. Maybe we can find out what the fuck happened here."

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We went first to the fruit stand across the street. As soon as they saw us coming, the two men who had been unpacking crates jumped inside the store and locked the door.

I knocked on the glass and a man with a wrinkled neck that poked out of a dirty T-shirt shook his shaggy head. He said in English, "Close! Close!" I heard him through the vent above the door.

"Oh, closed, huh?" I challenged. I grabbed an empty plastic bag and started filling it with mangoes. I handed some bags to my partner. "C'mon, Vandyne! Fill'er up!"

They watched us from inside the store and didn't make a move until we started giving away bags of fruit to passersby.

"Free! Free! Free!" I shouted.

"Hey!" yelled the shaggy-headed man. "What are you doing?"

"If you're closed, then all this must be trash!" I said. I rolled a pineapple down the street. Someone grabbed it and walked off.

The bolt slid out and the door, which had several bells and chimes tied to it, jangled open.

"I thought you people only stole an apple at a time!" the man yelled, grabbing our bags away.

"I thought you people kept regular hours."

"What do you assholes want from me?"

"We want to know what you saw down there."

"I didn't see anything! I heard sirens before I even knew what happened."

"Two men are dead. Their bodies are half a block from your store and you're not concerned at all?"

"I'm very concerned, okay? But I take care of myself. I concentrate on my store, my own business." He thumped his chest.

Not knowing what we were saying, Vandyne stepped back to the street and stared at the man.

"What's that black guy doing over there?" the store owner asked me.

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“Oh, so now you notice things happening around your store?”

“I’m telling you, Detective, I didn’t see anything and none of my workers saw anything.”

“I guess you asked them already?”

“I don’t have to ask! If somebody’s looking around, they’re not working. I’ll fire them!”

Suddenly, I heard metal gates rolling down all over the block.

“Your workers are calling the other stores!” I said.

“I don’t know!”

“How would you like me to shut down the sidewalk for our ongoing investigation of the area, pal? It might hurt your business a little bit if nobody can walk here.”

“Don’t you try to intimidate me, okay? I know who you are! You’re the one who got that old man killed and harassed the toy-store owner until he had a heart attack!”

“Then you know I’m the wrong guy to mess with,” I said, wondering if that could be construed as a threat in a court of law. “It was a stroke, not a heart attack, by the way.”

“You’re going to pay for all the damage you’ve done to this community!” He signaled for his workers to come out and pack up the fruit. “The gods always see that bad people get what they deserve—even a bad cop.”

I smiled and handed him my card.

“I’m glad that we had this chance to chat,” I said. “If you remember anything or want to talk for some reason, please give me a call at the precinct.”

He growled and raised his hand over his head to throw my card to the ground, but he let go of it too early. We both watched it flutter slowly to the slimy sidewalk.

Vandyne and I went to an over-rice joint on Bayard near the Five for a quick dinner. We sat down and a waiter slammed a battered tin teapot on the wobbly table.

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He sighed and brought over two thick teacups. I pushed the one that wasn't chipped to Vandyne. My hand shook as I poured some tea and topped off his cup. He tapped his fingers on the table in that fine traditional Chinese gesture.

I put my elbows up on the table and rubbed my eyes. I was tired, hungry, and still mad at that stupid store owner.

I had seen bodies, possibly tortured, in Vietnam, but that was in the context of a dirty war. What could possibly justify the deaths of these two young men here in America?

"Hey!" said Vandyne when I asked him about it. "What about all our black kids getting shot that nobody gives a damn about?"

"But black people do! The black community organizes and protests. Whether or not it gets picked up in the media is another thing. But Chinese people? Shit, they are just going to let this go. Nobody's going to talk about it. No witnesses are going to come forward. If those tourists didn't report finding the bodies, we would have had two bare skeletons before Chinese people said a word."

"If Chinese people don't care, then why do they live together and form Chinatowns not only in America but all over the world?"

"They're only together for the food. If you learn just one thing about Chinese people, Vandyne, it's this: They don't help their own in times of need. Oh yeah, if you've got money, they'll be glad to sell you something, probably at the best price you can find." I glanced at our smiling waiter who was slowly approaching us; he had no idea what I was saying. "But if you were in trouble or hurt, Chinese people wouldn't lift a fucking finger. They'd feel embarrassed for you, but that's it."

Our waiter, who had nothing to write with, came up and slumped over the back of a vacant chair at our table. He said, "Yeah?"

I turned to him and said, "Bring him chicken-fried rice and get me some sautéed bok choy over rice."

"You don't want any meat?" the waiter asked me, his breath reeking of cigarettes.

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"I can't eat meat tonight," I said.

"Are you sick?" he asked. "Meat's good for you when you're sick."

"Not for what I've got."

"We have a lot of better dishes, like a fresh grouper," he said, turning to Vandyne. "So are you sure you just want chicken-fried rice?"

I told Vandyne to take it as a compliment when people talked to him in Chinese. Vandyne smiled and nodded.

The waiter coughed into one hand and scratched his back with the other as he walked away.

"I've taught you well, Vandyne."

"Oh yeah, smile and nod. Take whatever they give you."

"You got it down pat."

"What if the guy's telling me to go to hell?"

"Aw, he wouldn't do that." While you're with me, I thought. "Have you ever thought about trying to learn Cantonese?"

"Not seriously. It would be tough and, anyway, what would my ancestors think? What would *your* ancestors think, Chow?"

"Well, we're both speaking English right now. What would our ancestors think of that?"

"They would be extremely shocked, ashamed, and disappointed."

"To hell with their shame and disappointment! My ancestors don't pay the rent."

Our dishes swung in. Vandyne's tourist special came with a slightly twisted metal fork jammed in the side of the fried-rice pile. I got my chopsticks and probed the bok choy carefully. When you get greens sometimes tiny black bugs get caught between the leaves. It's always good to check before chomping.

Vandyne took a bite and then he put on a pained look.

"Hey, Chow, can you—"

"No!"

"But it needs some soy sauce for flavor!"

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"They already cook it with soy sauce! If you add in more, you're giving yourself a ridiculous amount of sodium. You're going to end up with kidney stones or worse."

"I wasn't going to put that much more into it."

"Hey," I said. "You want to have dick problems?"

"Okay, okay, okay."

We both ate in about ten minutes. I signaled for the check, but the waiter waved me off. I left six bucks on the table to cover the meal with a generous tip. He cleared our table, shaking his head.

We came back to the Fifth Precinct on Elizabeth. Walking into the old brick house was like stepping back in time to 1881, because that was when it was built, and with no central air-conditioning or heating. The air conditioners stuck in our windows did little but drip water and raise a fucking racket.

Sitting at the desk immediately inside was the freckled face of Rip Mitchell. His first name was really Jim, but he used to have an extravagant mustache like Rip Taylor. He shaved it off, but he still liked being called Rip. The nickname had character and it wasn't insulting. Especially if you thought it stood for "rest in peace."

"How's it going, Rip?" asked Vandyne as we walked in.

"What's new, Rip?" I said.

"Vandyne. Chow," he said like he was taking attendance. He always said the least he could. He must have had a fat tongue from the lack of exercise.

I took a wide arc around Rip's desk to get as far as possible from the C.O.'s open office door and still make it to the stairwell. Damn, I thought, he's here late.

Our commanding officer, Sean Ahern, was short and thin, but he was as intimidating as a boulder rolling directly at you and picking up speed.

He had a small hairless spot in his right eyebrow, so we called him

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the Brow and, to his face, sir. You wouldn't want to piss him off. He had a bad temper and liked to stomp his feet hard and make you feel it on your chest.

Despite all that, the Brow had sparkling clear blue eyes that made him look incredibly innocent. He must have stolen them from some kid.

The Brow was out to get me because he had intended for me to spend my entire career as an NYPD prop at various Chinatown community events.

But I managed to break out and land investigative assignments. If I hadn't had the help of someone way up in the hierarchy, who was still anonymous to me, the Brow would have busted me down to guarding locked bicycles. My hockey skills during a benefit game against the fire department had impressed my guardian angel, and I wasn't sure if it was my scoring ability or my fighting prowess.

I thought I was in the clear, hiding behind Vandyne, when the Brow stomped his foot and yelled out, "Chow!"

I scuttled in and said, "Yes, sir?"

"Nothing," he spat out. "I just wanted to see how long it took for you to get here."

"Yes, sir."

"Get out!"

I saluted and left.

On the first flight of stairs, Vandyne let out a small whistle. "God-damned Brow has got it bad for you," he said.

"He's got it bad and that ain't good."

"How do you know that song?"

"It's a song?" I said, surprised. "It was what a friend in Nam used to say all the time. 'We've got it bad and that ain't good.'"

Vandyne and I were on the second floor, which housed the detective squad and its small holding cell. Our precinct was a little unusual in

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that it had its own detective squad. I guess the powers that be figured there wasn't enough stuff crammed into our tiny building.

We walked into the squad room, sat down on the lopsided couch, and looked at English, who was at his desk, on the phone. He looked expectantly at us. I gave him a thumbs-down and he nodded.

Two tourists were sitting in battered chairs by Vandyne's end of the couch. The man was wearing khaki shorts, exposing two trunks of knotty varicose veins. He wore a dress shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a ratty collar. He had almost no hair and his face had been sunburned several times, making it harder to guess his age, which had to be north of fifty-five.

"Hi, I'm Herman Shepherd," he said to Vandyne, leaning in to shake hands. "Herman," he said again before reaching over to me.

Vandyne said, "Hi, I'm John." I nodded to Herman.

The woman shook my hand and said in perfect Mandarin, "I'm his wife, Irene." She was over forty but had worked hard at maintaining herself. Irene had a china-colored, heart-shaped face with dull green eyes and apparently had made herself up at the restaurant before coming in. A mid-length skirt showed some surprisingly great legs, especially in contrast to Herman's. I looked up quickly, but she had noticed and smiled.

"My name's Robert," I said to both of them. I think Irene was disappointed that I didn't speak Mandarin with her.

English got off the phone and came over. "Not much to expand upon," he said. "Herman and Irene are from upstate. They come into Chinatown every so often. Saw some group of people gathered—"

"Chinese people," interjected Irene.

English shrugged and continued. "So they went over to see what was going on. When the onlookers saw they were tourists, they dispersed."

"I didn't know what they were saying," said Irene. "I don't know Cantonese."

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"It's tough to learn," I said.

"I've lived in Taiwan," Irene told me.

"I've never been there," I said.

"I was in Taiwan for a month," said Vandyne.

"Me, too," said Herman.

"What do you do?" Vandyne asked him.

"I teach geology at SUNY Buffalo. Sometimes I do exploration work for oil companies."

"I do translation work for the university's Asian studies journal," volunteered Irene. "I also lecture there, but I don't have tenure yet."

"Do you remember," I asked the Shepherds, "anybody who stood out at the crime scene?"

Herman frowned and looked at the floor. Irene said, "Well, I do remember this Chinese fellow in a red shirt, about average height. He gave us a rather menacing look. And I know that look. It's the resentment that they feel toward us." She looked at me. I glanced over at English, and he nodded at me. That was the guy who English had made out to be dirty and I had followed.

"That's about it," said English. "We'll be in touch if we ever need anything from you two."

"That's it?" asked Herman, rising to his legs. I half-expected his veins to burst and bleed.

"We have to let them do their jobs, Herman," said Irene, a little too harshly.

They said good-bye and English escorted them out. When their footsteps in the stairwell had faded, I said to Vandyne, "Go ahead."

"Damn, that girl's got Yellow Fever. Bad, too."

"You know what, though? Yellow Fever's lethal."

English was walking back in. "Paperwork's lethal, too, guys. Let's get going."

"I'll do the bodies if you do the storm drains, Vandyne," I said.

"Now that's a deal, partner."

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“Just make it neat, you two,” said English. “I’m dealing with enough shittily typed reports from work on the FALN. If you can start sentences with capital letters, you’re ahead of half of the meatballs who supposedly have more seniority.”

Vandyne leaned into me. In a low voice he said, “I have that thing tomorrow. Remember, Chow?”

“I do,” I said.

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