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SUCKER PUNCH

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From a certain angle, New York's theater world has aspects of a desert prairie-dog village where most of the activity transpires underground. Spotting a few of these creatures sitting on top of a village mound reveals dozens, maybe hundreds, of prairie dogs in tunnels down below. For the few hundred people already acting in or mounting a play on the Broadway stage, there are talented hundreds more laboring relentlessly beneath these lucky ones, in smaller venues, tunneling up towards those famous lights.

The 70's in New York City has earned a reputation as a time of dramatic social upheaval: radical fashion changes, rents beginning to soar, porno parlors, the birth of rap, dozens of Eighth Avenue hookers, a subway crime wave and new, brutal laws to combat increasing drug use – a careening ride of unexpected bumps and curves for everyone, including actors. So, after my one

(and only) Broadway play ended and without an agent, I worked at a variety of jobs: carpenter, tile layer, proofreader, street vendor, and even worked in a boatyard in Jersey City caulking boats, all to pay the rent while auditioning, whenever I could, occasionally landing a role (usually non-paying) in an off-Broadway production. In 1974, I landed my first talent agent. She hired me after seeing my work in a television commercial class and sent me out on exactly two auditions. Then, in less than a month, without warning, she committed herself to an upstate mental hospital. Shortly afterwards I signed with a second agent on a Friday afternoon, only to hear that the following Monday morning he was hit and killed by a garbage truck on Eighth Avenue. These were two stories I never brought up with fellow actors or potential agents.

So there I was, broke again and back in the tunnels. During this depressing phase in my life, I moved out of Hell's Kitchen and into a two-room apartment for lower rent in Alphabet City on the lower East Side. One month later, I was out of work with my rent due. My landlord was an angry old Cuban who thought the world was out to get him. He had a volcanic temper and a permanent snarl clenched around an ever-present fiery stogie. The last time my rent was late and I didn't respond to his banging on my door, he padlocked it when I was out. So I

grabbed onto a job not my cup of tea - cleaning offices at night and the occasional apartment during the day. It was work.

Stan, the owner and manager of "Maid For You" had been in the tunnels for years since arriving in the city some thirty years earlier. As a young actor, his dream of stardom refused to materialize. For years he resisted defeat while some scrambled past him and upwards. Others, discouraged, packed up and left town, but Stan hung on, morphing into playwriting - hair graying, running his service by day and writing at night. Business was slow when we met – it was summer - but he hired me out of sympathy and, I thought, kindness for a fellow actor. "Remember," he cautioned me on my first day, "No drugs, no drinking, always prompt, always polite, but if the client gets too offensive, leave, give me a call and I'll back you up." And, I was later to discover, he was a man of his word.

Going into strangers' homes can be chancy. Early on, I had one harrowing experience. That particular client was in his 40's, charming, educated, and strikingly muscular. He immediately told me he was big on massage therapy and wished to give me a massage then and there. Although I politely refused his repeated offers, he became more insistent. Stan had warned me to

watch out for clients who often used cleaning services as a ruse for sex. I sensed a definite undertone of menace and smelled liquor on his breath. My mind was racing. Think fast. Of course – I was an actor. So I smiled, oozing cheerfulness, calmly purring: "Wait a sec - I'm studying an amazing Asian technique of massaging backs using the feet - it's incredible, really. How about letting me try this technique on you first?" Happily for me he bit. I had him strip to his shorts and gave him a couch cushion for his head. When he was face down on the carpet I kept talking to him about the technique, all the while modulating my voice to disguise my moving away from him towards the door. I grabbed my bag, turned the lock, and dashed to safety. Whew! When I told Stan, he laughed sympathetically, paid me the full advance and took that client off his list. Stan trusted me – a standup guy. And finally one day some good news for him. One of his plays was picked up for a Broadway run. During the weeks of rehearsals, Stan basked in the limelight. He bought a tan Borsalino and a coat – an elegant, camel-hair Chesterfield. With silk scarves waving like banners, he strode up Eighth Avenue, a king on his boulevard. No piker, he splashed his radiance on his friends, forbidding them to spend a dime at Joe Allen's famous restaurant and bar on West Forty-Sixth Street's Restaurant Row. At the office, he laid out Belgian chocolates for the help.

I couldn't make it to Stan's opening night and before I had a chance to see the play the lights went out. It closed after three performances, a critical and financial bust. Undaunted, disappointment hidden, Stan rolled up his sleeves and was back at his desk, still erect and positive. The Chesterfield and the chocolates disappeared, but he kept that Borsalino. I had genuine empathy for Stan - he remained a good boss and a good man.

Soon after, he gave me a job, which was to become the ultimate, "only in New York" story for me. But there was a twist. Stan had phoned to warn me that the client's son, a doctor, had committed suicide in the apartment the day before. His mother was the client. She would meet us in the lobby, and he said, "Please be careful and behave discreetly."

The next morning, I left my apartment and walked up to Union Square to catch the Lexington Avenue Express uptown. Rush time was over.

The train car I caught was covered with graffiti. I was particularly taken with the large, colored painting that covered the entire outside surface of the car. It was a detailed painting of a grinning skeleton wearing a leather aviator cap (with goggles) and playing a violin against a background of fleecy clouds floating in a blue sky. Terrific. Another unknown New York street (subway car) artist.

The car had only half-a-dozen passengers, including a sleeping drunk, face covered with a newspaper; a subway cliché – with a splash of vomit on the floor for color.

A twenty-something red-haired girl sat opposite me, her face buried in one of the year's popular paperbacks, *"I'm Okay - You're Okay."* And another subway cliché: a couple of beer or soda cans rolling around, hitting the steel legs of the seats over and over. Clink, roll roll clink; clink, roll roll clink. The tin can symphony.

I got off at a stop in the Eighties and walked a couple of blocks over to Second Avenue to the Metropolis Café. I grabbed a stool, ordered a feta cheese omelet and coffee, and waited to meet the assistants Stan had assigned to me for the job. This way I could get to know them before work began.

Ira was the first to arrive: A quiet, red-haired guy with glasses, mid-twenties; a sweet guy. He was a new hire and hadn't bought himself any cleaning stuff yet. I told him not to worry.

He had been a medic in Viet Nam. He talked, I smoked. Staring into space with reddened blue eyes he told his story, sunlight glinting off the red hair on his arms. "The second week in Nam I got the mumps, so I was quarantined in Saigon when my guys went in-country," he said, gesturing nervously over the counter, his story sculpting his face. "When I was flown in

later to rejoin them they were in a firefight below a ridge with very little cover. The copter dropped me in at night, but the whole ridge was lit up like day with flares. I was scared shitless, Man, and the scene was bad – real bad. A lot of my guys were already dead. I was swearing and crying at the same time!" He spent the night crawling in the hellish light among his screaming, wounded buddies. I nodded in sympathy, quite moved. He told me how therapy hadn't helped much and that now he was "dead ended."

Then James arrived. He was nineteen, a pale, overweight marshmallow from the Mid-west, nervous sweat plastering hair to his forehead. Between mouthfuls of cheese danish, he told us how he had decided only two months ago to leave his tiny village to come to the fairy tale city he had read about, dreamed about, that maybe wouldn't mind so much that he was shy, fat, and queer. The Great Escape from Iowa. He was staying with an older friend. He had already worked his first job and had a knapsack full of cleaning gear. I gave them both the skinny on the job and the suicide, and we started out.

It was a typical Upper East Side Second Avenue apartment building: standard beige brick and soap-opera shrubbery. A set of heavy wooden doors were set in the large glass walls. They

opened suddenly, disgorging a young blond girl with several dogs on leashes. They were well-behaved enough except for a snarling Dachshund, but the dog walker was firm with it and herded the pack up the block.

The doorman had bad teeth. I handed him my card. "Come to clean, have you," he said in a strong Irish accent. He gestured us to a naugahyde bench in the lobby. I gave him the name and apartment number and the three of us sat down to wait. Hands behind him, the doorman rocked back and forth, grinning. “Know the folks in 22D, do yez?" he chirped, eyes as hard as diamonds. Hip to some cosmic secret only he knew about, our ignorance amusing. On to him, I just shook my head wearily. "Oh, they're good tippers, they are - you're lucky, Boys. Now yer hostess has been in and out twice already, but she’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Typical. He would know the building gossip, the intrigues, the weaknesses to exploit. He had to be on top of it – unctuousness and cunning in gold braids. Guys like him have an instinct for the jugular. And he had something else: an air of resentment, a bitterness, something the crimson uniform brass buttons couldn't hide. My own Irish instinct hinted that maybe something from his native village was still clutching him - some sin or family ghost, maybe, that had made him leave Ireland?

A minute later a woman in a white cotton dress came up the walk. The doorman pounced on the handle and opened wide. She refused his offer to help with two small bulging canvas bags, all smiles behind sunglasses. She looked us over without acknowledging us and held a whispered conference with him. He nodded, and she handed him a stiff new bill. "Thank you," she said hoarsely, and walked through the lobby with the bags and out of sight. The doorman produced another bill from his pocket and held the two bills up for us to see. "A good Monday morning, fellas," he beamed, "I've already made forty dollars and it ain't even ten o'clock yet! That's your lady," he nodded, pocketing the bills. "She'll be back down for you in a few minutes. Relax; smoke if you like."

James leaned over and whispered, "This doctor that killed himself yesterday - you think this is his wife?"

"Oh God," Ira moaned.

"No, it's the doctor's mother – and don't worry, you guys, stuff like this happens on the job all the time. It's New York. Just be quiet and efficient, do what she says, and then we'll get the hell out of here." Ira and I lit cigarettes. We waited.

Ten minutes later, the woman reappeared and beckoned silently. We followed her down the corridor where she buzzed for the elevator. She smelled of tobacco and hair spray, and I caught the faint odor of suntan lotion. She turned to us, eyes wide behind the dark glasses. "Boys, this is a difficult time for our family. My son was well-loved by many people, and I need you to help us through a difficult day." Her hoarse voice matched her leathery skin. I had met people like this out on Long Island. Too much smoking, booze and East Hampton sun. "And so you'll be sure to do a good job." From her purse she drew three brand new twenties and handed one to each of us. She turned around again, lit a cigarette, and stared at the elevator door.

It was a three-room apartment with a beautiful marble foyer; I guessed maybe Florentine marble. Muffled rock music floated from the hallway next to the foyer. The sunken living room was quite large with a rose-colored carpet and deep blue sofas ringing the sides of two walls. I spied an extensive vinyl record collection. Dark blue drapes covered a terrace door and glass balcony doors. It looked like midnight down there.

Above the sofas hung a series of large, abstract watercolors with squares of construction paper taped to the bottom of their frames. The squares had writing on them. Across the room

stood a baby grand piano, its glossy black surface and the carpet strewn with about a dozen large pills. On the piano top lay a couple of hypodermic needles and a length of mustard-colored tubing, the kind doctors use.

"Now, I know you boys will do a good, thorough job," the woman said. "Especially the bedroom, it needs careful attention." She pointed to a bulging trash bag and looked at me. "Would you please empty that bag now for me? The trash chute is out in the hallway." She smiled. Ira and James were relaxing, smiling tentatively.

In the trash room, I untied the bag and held the chute door open and fed the contents down the shaft. A torrent of cancelled checks, check stubs and accounting sheets poured into the black abyss. Curious, I stopped the flow and looked randomly at the stuff. There were several spread sheets with a lot of red ink. All the checks were dated in the current year, many of them made out to the doctor. The day after his death and his mother burns his financial records? Why? I shrugged. Forget it. It's New York. I dumped the rest and walked back to the apartment.

I thought housecleaning would be a breeze, a no-stress job, but nothing in this city is simple. Yeah, sure, I know life is full of mysteries, but this city has cornered the market, a kind of stagey magic show that bugs the hell out of me. It shrouds one mystery with another and then

throws a couple of misleading zingers into the deal – just enough to keep me off guard and make me dizzy trying to figure out what really is going on from what is really not. Recognizing the difference could be a challenge - this job being an example: a simple clean-up deal that could be something entirely different. Take burning those checks. Another zinger for me from the City.

Fuck You Pal, now check this one out!

Sometimes I felt like a boxer in a clinch: hanging on, catching a breath, praying to make it through each round so at the end of the day, I could make it home with some sanity left and maybe the fellowship and security of my local bar. Bars are absolute necessities in this town. They're the shrinks - oases where battered souls go at night for R&R.

I was sure the mother would have an explanation ready for any IRS agents that might come looking for those checks and records. *One of those housecleaning companies destroyed them, I'm afraid. I gave specific instructions, but you know how unreliable hired help is these days*. That would seem plausible. That morning, I woke up to a beautiful day and finally a job and, lucky me, another mystery.

When I re-entered the apartment the mother was digging out a mop, a bucket, and some rags for Ira from a small closet. I noticed that he and James had lost their nervous smiles, and

James was perspiring. What happened while I was gone? “Here’s a little extra,” she rasped, handing each of us a ten dollar bill from her purse. “Please do a great job.”

"I'll start with the bathroom if that's alright," I asked. “Yes,” she nodded, “and please use the bottle of Mister Clean under the kitchen sink. Now Ira and James, please wait here for me until I check some things with my daughter-in-law in the bedroom.” She disappeared down the hallway.

I go down to the piano to check out the pills. I pick one up, a large, oval pill. “Hey Ira – would you come down here a sec?” Ira steps down and I hold out my hand. He leans down.

“That’s a Quaalude; it’s a muscle relaxant, but people can use them as a sedative or for insomnia; they’re prescription only.” He glances at the needles and tube on the piano. “Man, it looks like someone might have been shooting up here. I don’t like this.”

“It’ll be okay, Ira; just do as I do – keep your head down and follow instructions. Basically it’s just three rooms – we’ll be out of here in a couple of hours.” I dropped the pill and took the nearby door into the tiny kitchen.

What a pit. It smelled of spoiled food. Cockroaches scuttled over a massive mess. Decaying food stuck to a half-dozen plates. Dirty glasses, silverware, cereal and cookie boxes, half-

eaten pizzas and bagels covered every surface, even the floor. Jesus, if that garbage truck on Eighth Avenue had been only a minute earlier or later I might be working onstage today instead of for another bossy middle-aged woman.

My sneakers made ripping sounds on an old juice spill on the tile floor. Open cupboard doors revealed the usual foodstuffs, a litter of prescription medicine bottles, and two large plastic jars filled with more pills. At that moment, as if she had x-ray vision, the woman's voice rose. "All the medicines that you see in there are the doctor's and they are all accounted for." *"Oh – get a life!"* I mouthed silently. The insinuation was insulting, depressing. I turned around. Those two canvas bags she had been lugging into the lobby were on the floor, now empty. They had bank logos on them. A soiled white bath towel had been thrown over the small stovetop, covering something bulky. Expecting more dirty plates and bowls, I lifted it up. Money. Lots of it.

The range was covered with stacks of bills. A chorus of eyes stared up at me: Benjamin Franklin's. Neat stacks, each about six-inches high and secured with a paper band stamped with a bank logo. It was a big pile. Now I was even more nervous. I replaced the towel. As if on cue the mother poked her head into the kitchen. "And that money has

been counted and recorded. I'll move it in a minute. You can start to work now, please." She turned around. "I've got to get something from my car. I'll be back soon."

From under the sink I got the Mister Clean and a plastic bucket, unpacked my cleaning stuff, rubber gloves, sponges, rags and a roll of paper towels - and put them in the bucket. Ira came in.

"She wants me to do the kitchen," he said. "Look under the sink," I told him. "More cleaning stuff."

I went back into the living room, my sneakers crunching those pills into the carpet. This whole shebang was beginning to make sense to me. I remembered sharing a joint with an au-pair girl on an East Hampton beach who worked for a famous Broadway writer. "My boss and some friends get their heroin fix a couple of times a week from doctors on Central Park West." The following fall, walking down that avenue after jogging around the Reservoir, I noticed people waiting in front of some street-level doctors' offices and remembered the girl's story. Soon I began to recognize faces. Repeats. They looked to me like Park Avenue or upper East Side types. Before these offices opened, they waited, reading the *Times* or the *Journal*, checking their Rolexes. Patient patients, so

early, so often. Always a few limos idling at the curb, drivers reading the *Post* or the *Daily News*. The daily fix from a sympathetic physician? Was the doctor an addict *and* a dealer? Or *both*? Wealthy clients and a mother with real presence of mind? It made sense - all those implicating checks up in smoke.

The living room was dark and oppressive. I needed air. I drew back the heavy drapes. Sun highlighted the skyline through dusty glass. I rolled the balcony door open a bit then crossed over to check out the record collection: The Who, The Doors, The Stones, Jimi, Janis, Cream - many more, mostly 60's and 70's stuff. I looked up at the paintings. Someone had written in capital letters on the sheets of construction paper with a Magic Marker:

"TO BE MISUNDERSTOOD IS NORMAL.

"CHALLENGE AUTHORITY."

"HEROISM IS PAIN -- YOU ARE A HERO!"

"HEAL THE INNER CHILD AND HEAL THE MAN."

There were others, warning of devils interior and exterior. Why, exactly? More symbols.

The breeze from the terrace flipped something off the wall; it landed at my feet. A Polaroid. I picked it up. A young bearded man in doctor's scrubs surrounded by several Asian kids.

Large windows behind them framed corrugated steel buildings outside, with palm trees in the background. Beard, long hair, and stethoscope. The guy looked to be in his mid-twenties. There were several other pictures. In most of them, he was smiling, but there was a noticeable discrepancy between the smiles and the large, moist eyes. They looked unsettled, pained maybe. Some of the children were smiling. All of them were deformed. Shiny scar tissue splashed randomly onto faces, shoulders, and arms. Scarlet welts on saffron skin, with no regard for a missing eye, limb, or the depression in a blouse where a budding breast should have been. In ball-point in the margin of one photo was printed "Nam, 1969." He stared out at me. I laid the picture down. Tough. If he was a user did it start in Nam?

A door evidently opened in the hallway because the music suddenly got louder. A young blonde wearing red-framed sunglasses swung into view, a portable radio on a shoulder strap. Iggy Pop. She carried a can of Pepsi in one hand, the other hugging a large briefcase to her breast. She came down into the living room, plopped onto the sofa, and opened the briefcase. I noticed some tears on her cheeks. But I didn't exist, period. She turned the radio down and began perusing papers from the briefcase. Her skin was unblemished, creamy rich, untouched by the sun.

She couldn't have been over twenty-two or three. Face and lips by Raphael, but with the sunglasses, denim cutoffs, white blouse and sucking Pepsi through a candy-striped straw, pure Lolita. Sunlight gilded the hairs on the nape of her neck. Golden beauty. I forgot to breathe. The widow? She worked busily, occasionally brushing away a tear. As I passed by her to leave, her lilac perfume flooded over me.

I saw Ira in the kitchen staring glumly at the mess. He looked at me and shook his head. I gave him a thumbs up. James came out of the kitchen with his cleaning stuff and I followed him down the hallway. As he opened the bedroom door, a yapping Yorkshire terrier suddenly scampered through his legs and back out to the foyer. When James went inside, however, the dog stopped yapping and raced back into the bedroom. I went on to the bathroom.

Dirty socks and jockey shorts on the floor and a half-filled bathtub. Did he OD in the tub? Jesus. Dead man's water? I rolled up my sleeve, pulled on the rubber gloves, took a sharp breath and plunged my arm down and pulled the plug, grabbed a paper towel and quickly wiped off the water. I carried socks and shorts out to the laundry chute in the hall, and on the way back, I glanced into the bedroom. The Yorkshire was busily strutting back and forth atop a big lumpy

mound of sheets, pillows, and blankets on the bed. He kept sharp eyes on James, who was making half-hearted passes at the furniture with his dust rag.

A door slammed and the woman's voice ricocheted down the hall. "Is someone tending to the bathroom?" I went back to work.

I poured Mister Clean full-strength into the bathtub and added water. A couple of minutes into scrubbing James came in. "What's the matter, James?"

"I can't work in there," he whispered, pale faced. I put my arm around his shoulder.

"Well, you've got to, Man," I said gently. He flapped his rag futilely, then turned and slowly waddled back down the hall. I followed him. "Look, James, the quicker we get through this the quicker we'll get out of here - just clean up and I'll be in soon to help. Just get through it, okay?" He stopped, looking at the floor.

"It's - it's - the dead guy...it's creepy." I took a deep breath.

"Look, this whole thing bothers me too, but it's not as if he's in the apartment you know. Anyway, I figure he probably died in the bathroom. OD'd in the tub."

He turned, mouth open, sweat sliding down his nose. "Oh - you were emptying the trash when she told us that the ambulance guys haven't come yet..."

"And…?" I prompted. "The body's still here - there in the bed" he moaned. My jaw dropped.

"What?" He flapped the rag in the direction of the bed.

"Under the blankets," he whispered. At that moment the dog, who had been lying on the bed, jumped down again, causing a sheet to unfold and drop, revealing a naked foot.

Christ Almighty!

My ears rang. My voice came from somewhere else loud and clear - and right out of Raymond Chandler. "You mean the stiff is still here!?"

Then, as if on cue, came a loud knock on the door. Someone snapped off the radio. Another knock. I entered the hallway headed for the foyer. The two women were sitting on the sofa stuffing the last stacks of money into a small alligator suitcase and the briefcase. A third knock. Ira came out of the kitchen and beat me to the door.

Two of New York's Finest entered the foyer, radios squawking on their hips. The women froze - clichés caught in the headlights. My brain was speeding. Before anyone else got into their own story, I hustled over to the cops. The older one had gray hair and an Irish name on his tag. The younger one was Italian.

Pulling out Stan's business card, I handed it to the older cop and told him my name. "The three of us were hired to clean this place, Officer," I said in a low voice. "There was a suicide here yesterday but I did *not* know that the body was still here until thirty seconds ago, I swear to *God*." I gestured to the women, who were now sobbing quietly. A little late, I thought. "That's the widow and the mother," I murmured.

He nodded. "Looks like we beat the ambulance boys. We were only three blocks away. The Meds have to call us first if it's a suspicious death." He read my card, popped a Chiclet into his mouth, and looked over at Ira, then checked out James behind me. Finally he folded his arms and surveyed the living room. The mother put an arm around the blonde and produced a hankie.

"There must have been a hundred thousand dollars in the kitchen earlier," I said softly. "But now it looks like they've packed it all up over there. Officer, I really don't think *we* have any business being here."

The cop studied the women with cool gray eyes. He glanced at me, chewing thoughtfully. Finally, he said, "A hundred thousand, ey?" With a finger he counted off Ira, James, his partner and me. He grinned. "Gee, pal, that's twenty grand for each of us."

The younger cop smiled, switched his radio off, and said quietly, “Went to the bank before they called the ambulance – didn’t plan on us - whoops.” He grinned. Then I realized right there that I had missed a chance to pocket a stack of bills from the kitchen. The doctor’s records were already ashes. Mom had already broken the law. No one would squeal on me. A perfect scam but I hadn’t put it together. Too slow, too late. Chance gone. Damn!

"Okay," the older cop said, "You three can take off. You have a nice day. We'll handle the water works." He winked.

In the hall, the medical team was wrestling a gurney off the elevator. I pointed to the apartment and we took the elevator down. As it descended my anger rose. A big, depressing ordeal had just gone down. Ira's hands were shaking. His mind or just the air-conditioning? James stared at the floor, looking miserable.

I needed perspective. It wasn’t just the dead body; it wasn’t just my rent. Against our wills we were made into more than just housecleaners. The bitch had it all planned. She had made suckers out of us!

Sure, we had made a nice piece of change, but we had been used, goddammit! I wanted to go home, wash the dirt off, then get a shot and a beer in my local bar. I needed some balance – find a reason again to keep on living in this bizarre town.

The doorman plucked my sleeve as we passed by. “Finished up quick, didja," he said as we went through the lobby. "Interesting work was it?" He chuckled through stained teeth. Did he know?

We pushed through the door and onto the street. The heat almost knocked us down. A half-dozen private school third and fourth-grade boys in blazers and caps raced in and around us cursing like truckers. Traffic was heavy. We all agreed we needed a drink. As we trudged towards Lexington Avenue to catch the subway, I kept my head down so all I could see was the sidewalk – still angry as hell. I came here to be an actor and, by God, people like this will not deter me. I’m back in the goddamn tunnels again and I’ll stay until I’m satisfied. You hear me? I could feel the city smirk. Go ahead, I smirked right back. Go ahead, you Mother - now I’ll be ready for the next sucker punch! An old TV show’s motto about the city was, “There are eight million stories in the naked city.”

Well brothers, this one is mine.

THE END