

NYC - 1990

Broadway winds down the Island of Manhattan like a threadbare sash across the chest of an over-age beauty queen, still beautiful, but well past her prime. It crosses her chest at Times Square, an area in long decline but one more recently going through some badly needed cosmetic uplift. Union Square sits on the top of the hip, slung a bit to the left to hide the widening hips of Chelsea. Carrying our anthropomorphic exercise to its logical, and oh so inevitable conclusion, you would find at the base of Fifth Ave., at the gently rounded apex of the Washington Square Arch, the fertile convergence of aspiration and acquisition.

Off to the right, around forty-fourth and third, at about what would be the right arm pit of our aging beauty, is Docks. If you look through the huge plate glass windows you can just see, through the deserted seafood restaurant, a half open doorway into a small office. Inside the office sits a squat, swarthy man with a long black ponytail. He is counting the evening's receipts. He stops for a moment as if hearing a sound, a sound out the ordinary. Not the sound of scurrying mice, or the wet hum of the ice machine. He turns and looks out into the empty restaurant and listens. Nothing. He laughs loudly in a quick burst and turns back to the desk. He tells himself he's seeing things again. Maybe. Or maybe the problem this time is not seeing things.

Gavin Hanlon loved oysters, from the creamy Chincoteagues of Maryland to the sharp and spicy Mahopecs from Seattle. A dozen or two and a nice bottle of crisp chardonnay and he was a happy man. Most of the cops he knew had plans to open bars when they retired, somewhere on Staten Island. He had always dreamed of running a small seafood restaurant out on the north fork of Long Island. Just thirty seats or so, and maybe a couple of rooms upstairs to rent out in season. Work his ass off from May to October and spend the winter months reading, maybe take a course at Stony Brook. He didn't mention these aspirations to a lot of his colleagues, most of whose greatest ambition after putting in their twenty was seeing their name in red neon hanging in a saloon window next to a Budweiser sign.

Gavin pulled up outside Dock's, next to one of the black and whites already there. He'd had quite a few oysters here over the years. He caught the eye of Sgt. Claypack through the window who nodded towards the side entrance.

"Like seafood Hanlon?"

"Yeah."

"I'm a steak guy myself, though I don't mind a lobster once in a while, especially those big ass ones at Peter Luger's"

"Great"

"Awful lot of work though, cracking all those claws open, messy, butter all over the place."

"You mind skipping the Emiril bit and let me in on what's happening here." Gavin suspected that Sgt. Claypack had been watching too much Food Network lately.

“Yeah, sure. The porter found the night manager croaked in the ice machine. No signs of a struggle, no money taken. Cause of death unknown so far, they’re just pulling him out of the machine.

Gavin walked through the swinging doors to the kitchen. The porter was gibbering in Spanish to one of the detectives, something about “cangrejo”. A little farther back the coroner and his assistant were pulling a body out from under the hinged door of a polished metal ice machine. They laid him down on the body bag, ice spilling out onto the floor. The coroner, bent double, brushed a few cubes off the soaked shirt front.

“Got a cause of death, Macy?”

“Not yet, Lieutenant, but it looks like someone whacked him pretty good across the puss.”

“Christ...”

The face was purplish blue, with crusted blood around the eyes. The nose was broken and both eyelids were discolored, almost black. They seemed almost...lumpy.

Lt. Gavin Hanlon had been thinking about oysters and chilled white wine. He’d been thinking about seafood, tuna and swordfish, mussels and crabs. Even while looking down at the swollen purplish face. Then, in one brief instant all thoughts of seafood were blanked from his mind. Except maybe crabs.

In that instant two things happened. One of the dead man’s eyes opened and Dt. Hanlon, veteran of 16 years on the New York streets, screamed.

Chapter 1

Okay, it wasn't exactly "Stop Thief", or "Look Out, He's Got A Gun" or even "Follow That Cab!". In fact, in the lexicon of big city street shouts it probably rated about even with "Hold That Tiger". But in New York you've got to be alert; heed the odd cry that rises from the gasp and clatter of the street. You've got to be ready. You never know when fame and fortune are going to run up and kick you in the knee cap. In this town you're either quick or you're dead. Or you work for the Post Office.

Still, I wasn't prepared for the desperate scream that greeted me as I emerged from the subway onto a blustery Union Square West.

"Stop that Box!"

I turned to its source just in time to duck a wind-blown refrigerator box hedgehopping down Broadway. It bounced once in front of me and arched gracefully overhead, performing a perfect half-gainer. It then continued down the street, along with a clanking, boinking retinue of empty cans and bottles, closely followed by a tall blond man in paisley bell bottoms and pig tails. The box, apparently an express, cartwheeled across 14th St. without slowing. The man stayed one step behind.

As I watched him chase his cardboard castle down University Pl. it occurred to me that everyone should live in the Village, at least once. And

what better introduction to the realm of the strange and Technicolor than a flying house? After all, it'd worked for Dorothy.

Momentarily lost in remembrances of things Munchkin, I turned down University Place and began my daily downtown run against the tide of NYU students and personnel streaming up towards the subway. I dodged a formation of balding men with ponytails and passed the line of sushi lovers stretched outside Japonica. Another half block and I could hear the happy hour murmur drifting out of the Cedar Tavern, where Jackson Pollack had once made a habit of drinking himself into a condition resembling one of his paintings. When I reached the corner of 11th St. I could see the awning waving outside Bradley's. I could also see where the displaced hippie and his appliance crate had washed up. The box lay broken against the side of the corner drugstore. He was standing over it, half muttering, half crying. I walked over and tapped him on the shoulder, while I pulled a couple of bills out of my pocket.

"Anything I can do to help?"

He turned and looked at me; pale, blue, watery eyes that slowly squinted.

"Yeah, you could've stopped the goddam box four blocks ago asshole. What'd think I was, the fuckin' Macy's Day Parade?" He took the few bills I offered with a snort of disgust and threw them on the ground.

My warm feeling of smug samaritinism leaked out onto the sidewalk like transmission fluid from a 64' Rambler. I could see it was going to be another one of those magical Manhattan nights.

I entered Bradley's along with a few errant rays of late September sunlight. A swirl of dust motes slow danced to a Chet Baker lament. I'd often thought of this airborne detritus as the bar's DNA, a diffuse and dissipated helix that held the nucleic shorthand for every event in the jazz club's long history.

Of course, on other days it just seemed like a good reason to take a deep breath before going in.

The room was long and narrow, with a twenty-seat bar to the right and six tables lining the opposite wall. The larger than life-size drawing of Bradley himself, smiling like a huge, and strangely reptilian, Cheshire Cat, stared at me from over the Baldwin piano that Paul Desmond had bequeathed the place. The usual crowd of three or four aging raconteurs were gathered at the far end of the bar with two or three tables of early diners in the back dining room. It was well lit inside, but the light had an imperceptible flicker to it, a quality of gaslight. On the street it was late afternoon, but inside it was already evening. Bradley's - where it's always after dark, but never too late.

The lack of a dinner time bar crowd was just one of the reasons that this was the ideal bartending job. No Happy Hour. No boisterous crowd of post-work beer guzzlers speaking gibberish in escalating decibels. No clinging groups of desperate day workers trying to wring some alcohol enhanced excitement out of their lives. Just a few old guys coughing decorously to themselves. Moore's seventh rule of bartending: Don't work anyplace where people are having too much fun before you get there. Or, for that matter, anytime soon after.

Since the first set didn't start till after ten o'clock, I had plenty of time to warm up to another night trodding the boards. Monica was waiting tables, or at least presiding over the few tables we had. As I rounded the end of the bar, I could see her on a barstool in the waitress station with the phone firmly planted in one ear. I leaned over and kissed her on an exposed shoulder. She smiled, briefly.

"Listen, Patsy, I'm not doing another showcase on East 3rd St....What do you mean pay my dues, they should name the goddam street after me by now. I tell you I can't do any more shows in garage space theaters full of friends and family, You should sell advertising to MCI..... Yeah, right, another piece by a gifted young playwright.... no I don't care if she's a woman, all that means is you found another gullible young Sam Shepherdess that you want to hump after rehearsal.... Listen, Patsy, I said no and I mean it, that's final. Find yourself another tool!"

Monica slammed the phone down.

"So, you going to do it?"

"Yeah, you never know who might show up."

"Right."

I paid my respects to the regulars at the end of the bar. They alternately muttered or wheezed in vague recognition.

I grabbed a sandwich from the kitchen and relieved Tommy the Greek, the day bartender. He had already switched sides of the bar, a change of venue that had, in reality, taken effect some hours before.

"Hey, John-o, how's it hanging?"

"Much the same, Tom"

"So, listen, I was telling the guys this story about the time Zoot Sims..."

"Uh, yeah, be right back."

I'd luckily spotted a customer at the far end of the bar. He looked familiar. It was the guy with the box.

"Listen I'm sorry about not stopping your, uh, box."

"No, shhhh, you listen."

I listened. Nothing.

"Yeah, well..."

He shook his head violently and held up one finger.

"Listen."

Still nothing. I was about to politely suggest he rejoin his wind-blown chattel when I heard it. He was humming. Bobbing his head, slapping a loose shoed foot to the worn tile floor and barely audible above the lonely trumpet playing in the background, he was humming. And all at once I recognized it. It was the "Yellow Rose of Texas". After two choruses he stopped dramatically.

"Got it?"

I nodded, not sure what it was I had gotten.

Good. Now listen carefully."

He leaned closer.

"All the poems of Emily Dickinson can be sung to that tune." I looked at him in dumb comprehension

"Now we're even." And with that he swept out.

I stared after him into the flash of fading afternoon sun. I then rummaged around my mind through a few vaguely remembered college texts.

Because I could not stop for Death-

He kindly stopped for me-

Da dee da da da da da

And Immortali-dee

Shit.

Trying to forget the encounter (and the tune I knew would be haunting me for the rest of the night) I concentrated on my sandwich and the sports page. I was standing at the corner of the bar nearest the door, and farthest from the tubercular chorus at the other end, opposite the big front window. After a while, disgusted with the Mets, I turned my attention to the parade of faces streaming past. A lot of people that looked like a lot of people. I had recently decided that after twenty years of bartending I had seen, barring mutation and disfigurement, every facial configuration conceivable. For me New York had finally become a city filled with Mr. And Mrs. Potato Heads, with a few gender, non-specific Potato Heads thrown in for good luck.

I was distracted from this reverie by a louder than usual cough from the service end that signified either an empty glass or an imminent cardiac arrest. In Bradley's I had long ago learned that these were events of at least equal importance, and frequently similar resolution.

Just as I was about to tend my allotted rounds one face turned in my direction. One pair of bright blue eyes and a too-wide smile that barely registered peripherally as I looked away. I stopped suddenly as I realized exactly who those features belonged to, a face that would stand apart no

matter how many others I saw. It was the face of Jack Coleman. The smile, the laughing eyes, the demented forward tilt to his head, all the components fit. The only thing that didn't was the fact that Jack Coleman had been dead for fifteen years.

Chapter 2

The rest of the night passed slowly. It was Tuesday and even with John Hicks playing along with Bobby Watson and Ray Drummond there wasn't much of a crowd. There were a few Japanese tourists nodding out during the first set and a collection of the usual jazz addicts for the last and not much in between. The final set didn't end until three and the place was always open till four, and oftentimes later. Bradley's was where the musicians met after their gigs to trade stories and sit in. Most of them referred to the place as the "Office".

I had plenty of time during the music to wonder about what I'd seen, or thought I'd seen. Every so often I'd catch myself looking over at the window.

Jack Coleman had been the head bartender in the first place I'd worked in the village, a pub called Shakespeare's. It was during the early eighties and the prevailing attitude had been one of conspicuous consumption, with Jack being one of the most dedicated of consumers. He had possessed a curious strain of scary Irish charm. He could kiss your hand and profess undying love and friendship one moment then try to brain you with a beer bottle the next. We had been pretty close friends for a while, but after his girlfriend had left

him, he got even more psychotic and people started to avoid his company, me included. Finally, he left the city, moving out to Colorado. The word was he owed the wrong people money. A few months later we heard he'd shot himself. Not a completely surprising development, especially if you'd ever been out with him when he was really twisted. That's when he liked to show you the scars on his wrists.

But still.

The set was winding down and John started to play "Naima's Love Song". It was one of my favorites and he knew it'd be good for a couple of Remys. I let myself forget Jack and get lost in the song for a moment.

After the last set Monica piled up her checks on the service bar and gave me the total of the charge tips. I handed her the money, but she just stood there and looked at me.

"Okay, what's up?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what's up?"

I looked down and looked up.

"Nothing at the moment, but, hey, stick around, you never know."

"Cute. Listen I've worked with you three years, right?"

"So?"

"So, this is the first time in three years you've gone a whole night without trying to look down my blouse."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"Maybe I'm not interested anymore."

“You have any problem breathing?”

“No.”

“You’re interested. And another thing, you keep looking out the window like you’re St. Bernadette waiting for another visit from the White Lady.”

“I didn’t know you were big on the lives of the saints.”

“I’m Irish Catholic, it comes with the territory. So?” She stared at me

“So?” I stared back.

“Okay fine. Listen I’m tired and I’m going home, you decide you want to talk give me a call. Tomorrow.”

I poured another round of cognacs for the musicians as Monica put her thrift shop mink on and headed for the door.

“Hey, wait a minute.”

She came back to the bar.

“Yeah?”

“Listen, there is something I need to tell you.” I bent over the bar and put my head close to hers.

She softened. “What, Sweetie?”

I lowered my gaze until I was staring straight down into her black push up bra.

“I just wanted to, uh, thank you for reminding me”

“You, bastard” And she turned and swept out, but I could hear her giggle as the door closed behind her.

A little later the musicians left. They could sense that I wasn’t into hanging out and listening to them tonight by the way the cognac bottle didn’t

move. I locked the door behind them and waited for the porter, who was late again. It was eerie in the place late at night, the eyes in Bradley's picture seemed to follow you around the room. I put Bill Evans on to keep me company, my favorite album of his - "You must believe in Spring". I poured myself a Remy and tried not to look out the window. And the more I tried not to look out the more I remembered. And the more I remembered the more I poured.

Jack had been strange, even for the Village. He kept several pets, these included a snake, a tarantula and a pair of hermit crabs. He liked to take them out and play with them, especially after a bottle of vodka and a gram or two of coke. He was a writer, or at least said he was. No one had ever actually seen anything he'd written, but no one had the nerve to call him on it either. I remembered the last time I'd seen him before he'd left, he had come over with a crate full of books he wanted me to keep for him. I said I'd take care of them for him. He turned before he left, looked me straight in the eye and said, "You'd better Moore, because I'll be back". Then he'd hugged me painfully and left, slamming the door behind himself.

A sharp rap sounded on the window at that moment, and I spilled the half full cognac, my third, down my pants. I jerked my head up to see the porter, Yarick, waving at me and pointing towards the door. I let him in and went behind the bar to turn off the music. I waited a minute as a recognized the song and let it play as I poured myself one more Remy for the road. It was Bill's rendition of "Suicide Is Painless".

Chapter 3

I got home just after five and just before sunrise. It's my favorite time of day in New York. The streets are deserted, as much as they ever are, and there's a momentary lull in the air. It's kind of like that split second when a roller coaster reaches the very top of a steep incline and pauses for the merest second, before plummeting downward, shrieking towards the earth.

I could see the light flashing on my message machine as soon as I let myself in. I pushed the button and heard a series of beeps, an indication that someone had called and not left a message, ten or twelve times it seemed. There are few things quite as obnoxious as an empty message machine. It's like someone sending you an empty envelope. I pushed rewind and let it whir back into place. I was pleasantly buzzed from the cognac, and I didn't want to think too much about anything before going to sleep. I pulled the shades tightly down, drank a quart of water, took a leak and went to bed.

I was just drifting off when the phone rang.

I picked up the receiver and dropped it somewhere near my ear.

"What?"

There was a pause. I swear I recognized the hesitation even before I heard the voice.

"Hi" It was a voice I'd heard a thousand times before and one I hadn't heard in several years. It still elicited a very dramatic, and contradictory, response from my head, my heart and my groin.

"Colleen?"

"Yeah" A long release of breath and a short sigh.

"What's wrong?"

Pause.

"I just needed to talk to someone."

"Someone?"

"Okay, I needed to talk to you, dammit." But there was a trembling lip behind that "dammit", I could hear it, shit, I could see it, being bitten back and then released slowly, quivering against the receiver.

"I'm all ears."

"Listen maybe this was a bad idea."

"Probably."

"Bastard."

"Not that I'm aware of." I was becoming self-conscious of my forced flippancy, and I still couldn't get that lower lip, the one that pressed so tremulously against the other end of the phone line, out my mind.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"Well, someone called and left a very strange message, and then after I got home I heard about Steven on the TV."

"Steven?"

"Steven Cohen, didn't you see the news?"