**A Red Rib Eye**

by Bill Judge

Chapter 1

I saw him. I saw him right away. And the second thing I saw, I saw that nobody else did.

When you are just stepping out of Delmonico’s down on Beaver Street, still savoring the juicy, mouth watering, marbled luncheon rib eye, served as red and as delicious as a jolly fat decadent king could want, you wouldn’t notice him. A thousand people wouldn’t notice him. I slowed my step a second and let a middle aged, paunchy, married, balding businessman - I could have given more description - and his hot looking female escort cross in front of me so they could catch a cab. Having lived in this world a long time, I didn’t do any more moralizing. I just hoped his wife was spending his money somewhere nice. That delay gave me another second.

Standing back from the stream of pedestrians on his side of the street, the “him” in question held a smart phone up towards his face and he appeared to read it. I hesitated again and another couple stepped in front of me. In fact, a lot of people stepped around me. You can’t just stop in New York City and not be a problem. Nobody noticed him. But lots of people saw me. None of them were happy. But I’m big enough and muscular enough and grizzled enough that nobody said anything to me even if my hair and whiskers had some grey. However, I didn’t plant my legs to give him a solid look. I didn’t want anybody else to know I spotted him.

I saw him tap at his phone six times, stop and then slowly transfer it to his other hand. With his left hand, he slipped it into his tweed sport coat, the kind of jacket a history or English professor might wear. Raising his right hand to his mouth, he coughed. That appeared genuine. He didn’t look well to me. A little bit grey in the face. Before stepping forward, he checked both ways and then joined the crowd, walking to his right, away from me. That suited me just fine. I walked to my right, away from him.

Oh, so you’ve been to New York and you’re thinking there’s no way I saw an aging teacher on a college pension, dressed in a brown coat, beige Dockers, tan loafers, horn rimmed reading glasses and a faded yellow flat cap, down and across a busy New York City street during lunch hour. Well, here’s what else I saw in the five seconds from when Delmonico’s man opened the door for me, and the group of four behind me and we stepped out. The total of five seconds being the time I needed to walk near the curb, settle next to the buffer of a street sign, and then use the delay of a couple of seconds to check him out pretty good. Given the lunch time, there were well over fifty people walking towards me, on my side of the street, from each side. There were the same numbers on his side. A woman in big sunglasses, a woman in white with a fluffy green blouse, traffic fumes, a white second level manager in a dark blue pin striped suit, department store quality, on his way to meet his working wife for lunch, a retiree couple, bent over, almost head to head, walking their pooch, a black woman in a Dallas Cowboys dark blue and white wind breaker talking on her phone, waving her other hand, her wrist adorned with a real diamond bracelet, maybe even Tiffany’s, a group of twenty somethings on their way back from lunch, joking and poking, their whole careers ahead of them, a solid white walk sign, a pair of young Latin women who crossed the street and almost trapped my eye, a belch from a red, white and blue postal truck and a grinding gear shift, a blinking red “don’t walk” sign, twenty three taxis, twenty two of them appeared to be occupied, a quick blast of a jack hammer, somewhere out of sight, echoing down the concrete canyons, fifteen coupes, two Beemers, a Fed Ex delivery car, pigeons, an Office Depot car, two black limos with tinted windows which also required my attention, Indians, Japanese, Pakistanis, American flags draped from poles mounted at forty five degrees, all swirling in a slight breeze, Arabs, Turks, the other cab driver, probably Nigerian, who was waiting for his fare to come out, Chinese and so on. I checked all of their hands as best as I could. Not a one was loaded. But, those people were always changing as they walked and there were windows in the buildings above me, and doorways, and the traffic changed. It was like stirring a kettle to keep it from boiling. Things like that could keep a man busy if he wanted to practice his skills. I’d rather check out the Latin women again, but it was too late. They moved on. My bad luck.

So, yeah, of course, I saw him. I was getting old, not dead.

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I had planned to go down to the Brooklyn Bridge and see what Walt Whitman saw when he wrote Crossing Brooklyn Ferry. That’s one thing most people didn’t know about me. I’m a poet at heart. Or, at least, I appreciate an era of poetry that’s passed. Whitman, Dickinson, Wordsworth, Tennyson. Almost prescient, Whitman wrote about the Brooklyn ferry - there was no bridge at the time:

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| “Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes! how curious you are to me! |  |
| On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose; |  |
| And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.”  Walt Whitman was a workingman’s poet and what he wrote about in that poem fit me to a T. Life is hard, messy, full of dirt, love, sweat, tears, joy, ecstatic and desperate, and shoulder to shoulder. I wanted to see what he saw when the water slapped the land and drew back again. I knew there would be people everywhere. While I loved crowds – there was a certain amount of ironic self insight in observing strangers in their natural world, busy people who lived their lives unaware of the dangers that they really should be worried about and I’m going to digress a little, they had their own fears and their own lives to live – parents worried about their kids, grown adults worried about their convalescent parents, about their jobs, about the crimes in their neighborhoods - I was curious about that guy across the street. More curious than you’d suppose.  I really wanted to go down to the Brooklyn Bridge but that was to my left, the same way he went. Not wanting to act like I was following him, I made my way down Beaver Street a few blocks and then turned right and then flagged a cab. The driver was a skinny Jamaican – I have yet to meet a fat one – complete with a smattering of green, black and yellow flags pasted on his dashboard. Instead of a Jesus statue, he had a bobble head cricket player glued on top of the dash. It was amusing. Climbing in back, I went ahead and told him I wanted to go to the bridge. Why not? I had time. The Yankees didn’t play until seven oh five that night.  The cabbie smiled with his almost full set of teeth and set the meter. Merging with the other cars, he jabbered about cricket. Did I know the game? I did. Was I a fan? Not really but I appreciated the skill. I lied a little. I figured it was a lot like baseball. Did I know any of the Jamaicans? No. Can’t say I did. How about Andre Russell? Nope. Now there was a player, he said. What about Austin Codrington? No, I didn’t. But he went ahead and told me how Codrington had played for Canada. How Jamaicans should play for Jamaica. There was a bowler, he said. Bowler? I thought. I thought we were talking about cricket. He rambled on. Had the highest first-class score of forty-eight, he continued. I had no idea what he was talking about but I knew he wasn’t talking about anything with ten pins. He should have played for his home country, he said. He tapped hard on one of his Jamaican stickers. How he, the taxi driver, played in Central Park on Saturdays against all of the other Caribbean teams, British teams, German and South African teams. How long you been here,in America, I asked. Twenty seven years, he replied. His lip curled a bit. It’s okay, he said. He quickly nodded towards his driver side window. Makes me rich here, he laughed, but I want to go back. Better weed. Better women. Too much work here makes a man sick, he said.  Sucking in a big breath, I stifled a laugh. Crazy as it sounded, he was probably right.  While he talked, I kept an eye out for cars that tried to catch up or seemed to tail us. I had him detour a couple of times, making excuses about wanting to see this or that. We’d slow down, park at a curb, or sped up. He never asked why. He didn’t care. He kept the conversation going. The meter kept count. I was the guy that made sure nobody followed. I was funny like that.  We drove across the bridge and he dropped me down near Fulton Ferry. I dropped back from the road and pretended to watch him drive off. Instead, I checked out the other cars and taxis that turned into the park. I counted out fifteen cars before I stepped forward.  Strolling with the mid day crowd, I could smell the musk of the East River and I watched the lazy sea gulls drop for French fries, crusty pretzels and bits of hot dog buns that were carelessly dropped by the tourists. Long ago, in Whitman’s time, the grey gulls would have worked the shore for shell fish like real birds but work like that was out of date - sort of like the long ago blacksmiths and wagon makers compared to the programmers and web designers of today. The only muscle strain from computers came from repetition and poor posture. Shrugging, I passed a teen couple who handed off a thousand dollar Galaxy S10 to a stranger so they could get a better picture of themselves than a selfie. Intrigued, I got a quick read on their new friend. Wearing a tan cruiser hat, t-shirt, shorts, sandals, and saddled with a backpack slung over one arm, he said, “Sure,” and handed off his own Nikon D850, one of the best travel cameras made, to his mixed Asian white girlfriend. She draped the leather strap around her neck and watched serenely.  He didn’t seem like he wanted to do it at first but he went ahead and snapped a quick pic. Dissatisfied, he took another, and another. And then he motioned them to get closer together. He clicked a few more. He waved his hand with his finger out like a baton, waited for them to pose and pressed again. After grimacing and wrinkling his nose, the photographer gave a slight shake of his head and three quick brushes with his hand which meant, ‘get closer’. Apparently, the couple had enough because the young male stepped forward during the new set of snaps, held his hand out and said, “Thanks.” The photographer’s eyes widened in surprise as he gave the phone back. It was amusing.  Leaning against a fence post with my back to the river, I continued to do what I liked best, I watched people. Over my left shoulder, a ferry boat was packed with sightseers. With a rhythmic thrum, motorized yachts powered through the waves, pushing plumes of water up over their bows. One of Manhattan’s broad shoulders sloped down to the river, and its muscular buildings rose higher and higher as it stretched further away. I listened to the jokes and the laughter of the people on the pathway just in front of me and thought of another set of lines from Whitman’s poem.  “Just as you are refresh’d by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh’d,  Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,  Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm’d pipes of steamboats, I look’d.”  I did see a few sloops and cutters and ketches with their sails filled with a wind that fluttered the flags on shore. But rusty brown barges replaced the steamboats of the late eighteen hundreds. And lovebirds, tourists, families and idlers like me replaced the brawny tradesmen and husky women who wore yesterday’s dirt on their working clothes. Traffic from the bridge and nearby thoroughfares hummed. An occasional plane buzzed the skyline. It got to be where I hardly noticed the noise.  After the big steak lunch, I wasn’t hungry but I was thirsty and searched for some nearby watering holes, hoping for refreshment, literally water. No alcohol for me, there was too much on my mind.  “He” wanted to see me and I wanted to see him but he had set the place and time. The place was Yankee Stadium. I knew that because he had dressed as an “Old Professor” which was Casey Stengel’s nickname - the famous Yankee manager. He knew I’d pick up on it. The time was game time, gate six. That was the six taps on the phone. We’d arranged codes like that long ago. Maybe ten years ago. Had it been that long? But, the cough? I don’t know. That wasn’t part of the signal. But it was something I’d find out. He didn’t look well, not well at all and that bothered me but I just had to wait. I was still thirsty.  I figured the snack stands would sell bottled water but I was pleasantly surprised to see that the city still had portable drinking fountains set up along the walk way. Slurping like a camel, the city water had a good, clean, fresh taste. When I finished drinking, I stepped back and ran the back of my wrist and hand across my mouth. Calypso music had piped up from somewhere behind me and I brightened. I headed towards it despite the warnings of my internal clock. It was getting late but not quite late enough. I needed a distraction.  Even though caution was second nature for me, the appearance of the Colonel made my nerves tingle. He had sought me out for a reason. Back in the day, we had done a number of black ops. We had busted spy rings, killed bad guys, saved the world. I was just a bucking bronco specialist, among a team of specialists and we all looked up to him. We did our bits and pieces together and he got us out alive. Even though we were successful with our missions, after a time, we were quietly disbanded. They never rode a hot hand too long. I dropped out of the military, free lanced and made enough money to retire. Given the inaction, I lost track of him. But now, the Colonel was back. Maybe with another mission.  Following the music of the pipes, I weaved through the walkers. Up ahead, a clear glass building enclosed a rotating carousel. A small crowd of people gathered around it. The sight of the families, people having fun, little kids smiling on the painted horses was a pleasant diversion. I placed my hands to rest and watch on a low Plexiglas fence that served as a barrier from the grounds and the merry go round. With the mothers holding them by the waist, toddlers grabbed the vertical pipes of the horses as they bobbed up and down and slowly turned in the warm, late afternoon sun. Whoever restored Jane’s Carousel did a first rate job – bright silver leaf hoofs and glass jewels sparkled in the lowering light. The yellow, green, blue, purple, red, and gold outfittings and saddles draped the chestnut, black and dappled grey horses. Mirrors and cameras flashed. Although they distracted me, I didn’t feel threatened. It was pure joy that shone on the children’s faces. I wished I could hop up and take just a three quarters ride around but nobody would appreciate a man of my size riding along with no kids of my own. Grateful for the few minutes of real American life, I decided to shove off and head back towards the bridge. I needed to hail a ride to the stadium. I still had time but I didn’t want to rush it. There was always the unexpected.  I glided down the walkway. A minute later, a pick pocket dipped his hand into a grandmother’s purse and snatched her wallet, as nimbly as one of the gulls on the shore, as she bent over a stroller adjusting the straps. Maybe he thought no one would see him because he was pretty well hidden by the passersby. Maybe he didn’t care. But I saw him. I gritted my teeth and the muscles in my nineteen inch neck rippled. I grabbed the miscreant by his scrawny bicep and squeezed. He was stupid enough to protest and say, “Hey man.”  I mashed harder until I saw his eyes bug out and water and then I whispered nicely, “Shut up,” under my breath.  Yanking him back towards the older woman, and stepping in front of her stroller, I said, “Excuse me, ma’am.” I waited a second to get her attention. I got it. “My son saw you drop your purse.” I jiggled his arm like a puppeteer.  “What?” Her wrinkled face looked up into the low sun from under her floppy hat. She kept a hand on the carriage straps while her fingers touched the baby.  Finally telling the truth, I said, “He picked up your wallet.” I pushed the kid forward. I knew I was hurting him pretty good. I made sure of it.  With her eyes darting from me to him and back again, she grasped her oversized straw bag and kept a tight hold on the baby.  “What?” She asked again.  I pushed him forward, just using the hold on his upper arm.  Getting the idea, the kid held out the wallet. “Uh, uh, here.”  Reaching out with her free hand, she again tried to search our faces in the sun but had to squint to do it. “Thank you,” she said. “I must have dropped it bending over.”  “Welcome, ma’am,” I said and tugged the teen away from her line of sight.  Pushing the purse deep into her bag and swinging it more in front of her, she looked our way for a while and then lost interest.  We mingled into the mob that still walked down the path. “You’re lucky, kid, that I’m in a hurry.” Narrowing my eyes, I gave his arm a final squeeze, pushed him, and said, “Beat it.” I watched him stumble a few steps in the opposite direction. I had to hope he didn’t go right back to grandma as soon as I left. Just to spite me.  I found a taxi stand and barked out, “Yankee Stadium,” to the cabbie and settled back for the ride.  -----  Peeling off my cab fare, I joined the hometown fans, passing the ticket and program hawkers. “Tickets here. Tickets here.” “Get your programs here.” They all barked in a way that pleaded and commanded.  The closer I got to the stadium, the more crowded it became. Naturally he picked a game with the Red Sox during a September pennant run. You couldn’t script it any better. The crowds were three times bigger than normal. I expected him to sneak up behind me any minute and whisper something, maybe he’d give me a meeting place and time, and then fade away into the horde again.  I got closer and closer to the gates. The people around me bumped up into me. Little kids, their parents with their camera bags, lovers on their date night who thought nothing of those around them when their focus was on themselves. Teens and young adults were eager to see the Yankees crush the Boston scum. We were all shoulder to shoulder as we were herded towards the smaller openings. I was tapped and touched a hundred times but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Music blared. People talked and teased. Red Sox and Yankee fans bantered and some got into a friendly push and shove and started a chain reaction of little jolts and stumbles. And then it happened but I was too late to see exactly how it happened. I felt something in my pocket and wanted to reach down to confirm but I resisted. I didn’t want to draw any attention to any hand off. It was strange. We were here to set up a place to talk. Why make it more complicated? All we need was a couple of words and instead he dropped something in my pocket.  Mission accomplished, I started to make my way to the outside, away from the lines streaming into the gates. It wasn’t easy. It would have been the perfect time to stab me or inject me. My arms were pinned backwards, away from my body as I swum through all of the people. Eventually, I got beyond the periphery.  Leaning against a wall, I searched the faces but I didn’t see him or anything out of the ordinary. All of the older folks had someone with them. Then, beyond the Yankee team store, across the street, underneath the overhead rail line, I saw him standing next to an open taxi door. He made an odd gesture with his hand. It wasn’t a wave but a send off like a half salute and then he settled into the cab and left. Puzzled, I stared after the red tail lights as long as I could. I didn’t dare acknowledge the wave.  I patted my pockets like anybody would who would have just been in a crowd like that. It gave me the chance to feel for what had been dropped. I didn’t pull it out. I wasn’t exactly sure what it was but I had a pretty good idea. As big as it was I was surprised that he had somehow slipped it into my pocket while I had been in line. It didn’t make me feel very good about my defensive abilities.  Going over, in my mind, all of the people who had gotten close to me in front of gate six, I knew there hadn’t been an old man. There had been lots of teenagers, young adults and then a couple of boys. He could have used one of them. But then again, no. Maybe in a foreign country but not here. There wasn’t a kid around town that would give an old man the time of day. Maybe the young couple who seemed so in love. It was possible. My pockets were loose. I got bumped pretty hard several times. Could be. He had lots of people that worked for him.  No, wait, I remembered telling myself. It wasn’t the young couple. It was a vendor. He wore a straw hat. Sunglasses. Yankee jersey. Grey cargo shorts. I never saw his face. He mingled in the crowd, selling his programs until about fifteen feet before the gate. I got bumped by someone and then the vendor on the other side of me tapped me with a program. “You sure you don’t want one,” he growled, in a Jersey accent as he brought the program down along my side. He had a very gravelly voice. It was irritating. I didn’t see his face. No, I said and I looked beyond him. Somebody else touched me on the other side, trying to wriggle past us, and he must have slipped it in then. By the time I looked his way, that straw hat was two people removed. I never suspected him.  I caught a cab at the street and went in the opposite direction that he did. I gave Grand Central as my destination. It was as good as any.  As soon as I knew I wasn’t followed, I pulled a thin Samsung smartphone out of my pocket. Turning it over, I wondered why the Colonel didn’t just meet me somewhere. New York was a big city. We could find a quiet place to get a coffee and talk. Why would he hand me a phone so he could call me?  I turned it over again. He must have had his reasons. I pressed the center button and it didn’t turn on. I pushed it again just in case I hadn’t put enough pressure on it. Nothing. I pushed the side button to power it and it didn’t boot. I realized it was dead. He wouldn’t be calling me on a dead phone. Then I remembered that odd little half salute. I realized something else.  The Colonel was dying.  ©2019 Bill Judge |  |