



THE MANNEQUINS

By

Salvatore Difalco

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...I must say that I don't think I have ever read a poor story by Salvatore Difalco, and "The Mannequins," is no different.*

Charlie Squillaci (great goddamn name) is an aging gangster too old to get out of the game and too old to stay in the game, every last job leads to another last job and every problem still surprises himself when he provides an answer. The definition of old school, he doesn't know how to balance the issues in his life with the life, and how having a brain deteriorating into mush does not make an easy bridge to build between the two.

This story, bordering on novella, is one of those solid pieces of literature that you wish you had thought to write. There is a slow burn that exists throughout the lines, like driving on an interstate at the speed limit and knowing that going faster won't make a damn bit of difference.

Yet, throughout, Diefalco manages to create a style of brain fog within the text for the reader that parallels the same symptoms of his main character, and that is the type of literary feeling that just makes you tingly all over.

Wrapped up in, "The Mannequins," is a sense of longing. Losing your memory, losing the ability to do the job you're supposed to do, wanting to get out of the life you have, knowing violence having done violence, keeping your family close knowing that you're apart of the cause for their pain, a lovely tinge of surrealism that comes from dramatic and repressed issues, etc. and so forth...goddamn.

Gangster's paradise is existentialism.

Five Stars.

WHY I LIKE IT: Senior Editor CHARLES writes...graceful, sly, complex, fluid and sexy.

Five Stars

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

"By the way," Johnny said, turning to Pino, who fondled a pink foot from one of the boxes, "now that it comes to mind. Yo, Pino. Go out to the van and bring in those mannequins I scored from Solly, the jobber." He paused. "Hey! Quit handling the fucking merchandise and pay attention. What's the matter with this guy, Squid? What a loss for science if we don't freeze his brain when he dies. Pino!"

The barista served Charlie the espresso and slid a steel sugar bowl with a slender serving spoon beside his cup. Charlie stirred in two spoons of sugar and drank. Not the best espresso in the world — his tongue curled from the bitter aftertaste. The barista offered him a chaser of cold water; Charlie lifted the small glass and surveyed the bar-cafe for a free table and for the presence of anyone who might disapprove of his presence. The Calabrian 'Ndrangheta, distinct from its Sicilian cousin, was spreading its tentacles throughout the city and beyond, but had for decades ruthlessly — though not always efficiently — maintained control of Toronto's Little Italy.

The Mannequins

By Salvatore D'Alco

*We're like so many puppets hung on the wall, waiting
for someone to come and move us or make us talk.*

— Luigi Pirandello

CHAPTER ONE

Charlie Squillaci cruised south along Fuhrmann Boulevard on the outskirts of Buffalo with the windows of his Buick open and the cool October air rushing in, hinting both of autumn and of sulfur, the latter endowed by the belching chimneys of Republic Steel in Lackawana — radically diminished from their billowing heyday and harkening back to a more muscular and prosperous past in the now aptly named Rust Belt — a stench that Charlie consciously or unconsciously associated with home.

The Buffalo Skyway stretched overhead, illuminated by the burning, pressing headlights of Friday evening traffic. In contrast, except for a truck or two and a few cars, Fuhrmann was tranquil and as Charlie passed the fragrant Tift Nature Preserve his shoulders relaxed. He checked his dash clock: 6:30. Twenty minutes to kill; he didn't want to arrive early and face ridicule for being a keener or lacking a proper timepiece. He passed several darkened industrial buildings, vague empty lots, and a row of range-style homes looming in shadow, a window here and there lit by lamp or glowing screen.

Ricky had told him the warehouse — a large white building with a MANNEQUIN HOUSE sign he couldn't miss — was located on Ridge Road, a few blocks east of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. If he hit the botanical gardens he'd gone too far. *Wear your glasses*, Ricky had exhorted, as if Charlie needed reminding; after sunset his eyesight went south. Not that the glasses completely corrected the problem; he still dreaded driving at night, a teeth-gnashing exercise in caution if not terror, but without them he was all but blind.

He turned off Fuhrmann and continued east on Ridge Road. He passed the Lackawanna Halal Market and came upon a stretch of orange storage lockers lit by halogen security lamps, the light of which fell in harsh triangular slabs. Perceiving a movement among the sharp-edged shadows of the complex, Charlie eased over to the gravel shoulder or walkway fronting the property and crunched along for a better look.

Something — maybe a feral cat or one of those mangy coyotes that had been spotted at the Tift Nature Preserve — or someone darted out from between two sections of storage lockers with surprising speed, reaching the steel wire perimeter in seconds. Whatever it was breached the fence and did a beeline for the moving car's passenger side. Startled, Charlie's foot hit the brake instead of the accelerator and the Buick jerked to a stop. His glasses flew off his face as his seatbelt, digging into the folds of his soft left pectoral muscle, halted his forward momentum and prevented his face from smashing into the steering wheel or windshield, but at the cost of his equilibrium.

A wave of vertigo coursed through his body and his head started spinning; the halogen blaze of the storage units' security lamps forced him to shut his eyes. He felt like he was falling from a great height, accelerating to the earth. He burst into a cold sweat and for a second thought he might faint. He pressed his fingertips to his chest. Was he having a heart attack? This is how it happened. One minute you're breathing, next minute devils are pitchforking you.

He fumbled for his glasses, piggybacking the shaft of the steering wheel but otherwise undamaged. He slid the glasses onto his face, looked up from the dash and to his horror saw a naked old man — stick arms upraised, chalky flesh tufted with sparse gray hair — standing ten or so yards away in the vaporous headlight beams.

The old man's bloodshot eyes evidenced either extreme grief or inebriation, or even madness. He stood there, arms uplifted as though surrendering to a policeman or an armed robber. Then he lowered his arms and began to walk toward the Buick. Contrary to the optics, he moved with the stride and shoulder swivel of an athlete, and within seconds stood inches away from the car, eyes blazing, a tortured grimace twisting his face.

Charlie slammed both palms to the horn, held them there for a deafening moment and leaned back, appalled. Louder and more forceful than he anticipated, the horn blare and its lingering reverberation strained his heart and his chest throbbed with pain. He lifted his hands off the horn and grasped his head. Was this happening?

A heavy truck in the opposing lane roared by and rocked the Buick, reanimating a pallid Charlie. Recalling with a shudder the naked old man, he looked out the windshield. No sign of him. He checked the side windows and rearview, but the old man was gone. Charlie glanced at the dash clock and when he saw he had five minutes to make his seven o'clock meeting, he hit the gas pedal and raced down Ridge Road.

He passed the Ebenezer Baptist Church and, as Ricky had promised, Charlie soon spotted the substantial MANNEQUIN HOUSE sign — in blocky white letters a yard or so tall on a black Plexiglas sheet some three yards wide, mounted over the warehouse's centrally located entrance. Charlie wondered why people so invested in discretion and reticence would so brazenly broadcast their business. Then again, the likelihood of potential thieves targeting mannequins for a score, or authorities suspecting anything untoward with so blatant an operation — no mistaking it for a strip joint or a kooky dance club in the boondocks, or even a grow house absent the conspicuous and unassailable skunk stink — was slim.

Then again, maybe it was just a legit warehouse for mannequins. They had to be kept somewhere, no? They had to be kept in a safe, clean place before being shipped off to wherever they were needed. Charlie had never given mannequins much thought one way or the other. They did seem to be waiting for something. How and why the bosses came into mannequins lay beyond his interest, pay grade, and job description. Indeed, it favored him not to know more about the behind-the-scenes mannequin machinations.

He pulled up the asphalted driveway — marked with reflective yellow chevrons that suggested to his street-wise radar significant nighttime traffic — to the parking spots in front of the two-door entrance of the white, aluminum-clad building, a clean, sizable structure. He parked between a black Mercedes-Benz that could've belonged to any number of men in the organization — though Ricky drove a black Cadillac as far as he knew — and a white, unmarked service van. Charlie released the steering wheel and checked his hands, trembling — but he felt no fear. Neurological in nature, and not prompted by emotional surges, he'd first noticed the trembling a week ago after he nicked his chin shaving, and it gave him ample reason for concern. He recalled his mother's debilitating tremors when Parkinson's had claimed her, and her anguish at losing control of her motor movements, her ability to speak, and independence.

Charlie made fists and studied the windowless warehouse and its extravagant sign. A little out there, this whole deal. Maybe there *was* big money in the mannequin racket. They'd been talking about going legit. The heat had been intensifying of late. Uncertain times lay ahead. Morals were changing, habits, attitudes. People had families. People didn't want to do hard time. People didn't want to die. He climbed out of the Buick, smoothing the creases of his trousers and jacket sleeves.

If Ricky wasn't attending the meeting, who was? Best thing that could happen was an

assignment offer that Charlie might or might not take. What was the worst thing that could happen? Well, the *worst* thing, certainly, always lurking as a possibility. And if this were the case, so be it. There'd be no begging or other self-preserving shenanigans. If you live by a code, you might as well live up to it.

He hit the intercom buzzer. Seconds later an electronically distorted and unintelligible voice responded over the speaker and clicked off.

"It's me," Charlie said. "Squid."

A burst of interference issued over the speaker and the doors unlocked with a hard click and discordant buzz. Charlie pulled open the door to his right and stepped into a brightly lit lobby with two stainless steel office doors and a composite metal ceiling fixture reminiscent of a deconstructed Tin Man. Two headless mannequins, female, undressed, small-breasted, and faintly flesh-toned, stood sentry at each of the doors, though if intended to showcase alluring samples of the product, or to intimidate solicitors, they missed the mark.

A smell of fresh paint permeated the air, not unpleasant; and the epoxy-covered floor, perhaps also newly installed, gleamed like a slick and stuck to the soles of his scarpini as he ventured further into the lobby, unsure whether to knock on one of the doors and if so which one — knocking on a wrong door might lead to unintended complications. The arms of the mannequin to the right were lifted, palms up — the gesture reminding him of the old mad man he'd seen or thought he'd seen on his way there. The other mannequin's arms hung at its sides, almost despondently, and Charlie found its inanimate negativity disquieting.

The lobby opened to a pot-lit hallway that led into the unlit depths of the warehouse. The door on the right swung open and a short man with a severe widow's peak and thick sideburns stepped into the lobby. He had on a burgundy three-piece suit without a tie and with the collar of

his black shirt opened wide, revealing a thick gold chain with its chunky crucifix and screaming Jesus nesting in a nest of black curls. His bulging left eye, an acrylic ocular prosthetic, stared nowhere. It was Johnny Morabito — an old colleague of Ricky’s who years back had fallen out of favor with the bosses.

Charlie couldn’t mask his surprise and mild displeasure at seeing him; the two had never connected. “Johnny,” he said. “Thought you were ... like in Miami.”

“Miami?” Johnny said, lifting his black eyebrows and stepping toward Charlie, his small hirsute hand held out before him. “Your idea of a euphemism?”

Charlie shook his hand. “How’s that?”

“A euphemism, for you know ... ” Johnny brought his hands together and tensed his face and shoulders, pantomiming strangulation.

“Ah,” Charlie said as his eyes bounced from one sentry mannequin to the other. “What can I say? The screaming of sinners fills the hottest corners of hell.”

“I’ll quote that, Squid. Did you lift it from a catechism?”

Charlie smiled.

“Do you know what it means?”

“Vaguely. So is this your new muscle?”

Johnny winked his good eye, acknowledging the curious optics of the headless mannequins. “I know, Squid,” he said. “What can I say? Look at them. *Look at them.*”

Charlie nodded to acknowledge that he wasn’t blind.

“But I was told not to lay a finger on them — God forbid — and I follow orders,” Johnny said. “When the bosses asked me to manage this waterfront operation, I thought staging-house for contraband from the ships, or a chop shop, you know, not a hotel for mannequins. And you

must be asking how the fuck we got into the business of mannequins. Well, long story and I ain't got the time, but let's just say why I called you here, and why I got the nod and why Ricky arranged the meeting, is related to the acquisition of this end of the business. The warehouse and contents settled an overdue debt — well, almost settled it, and this is the thing. It's not paid off *completely*. It needed to be paid yesterday — as those thieves from the collection agencies say, *in full*. As of today things have changed. Payment is past due. The train has left the station. The pigeons have scattered. You follow?"

Charlie nodded, but Johnny spoke so fast he couldn't process half of it, as true now as in the past. "So what's this meeting about?" he asked.

Johnny grimaced. "No foreplay, huh Squid? No petting or smooching. You want to dive straight in sans any lubrication. Okay. Here we go. They say you're looking to retire. Not easy in this business. They also say that Squid isn't what he used to be. That he's been slipping, getting sloppy. Are they right?" Johnny leaned in. "Because," he said, turning his head as though checking for eavesdroppers, "seems like you're far away, Squid, stranded in some Scajaquada of the mind — it's your eyes. I stare at your eyes and ask, where are they? What's going on? And you have to admit you're looking a bit chewed these days, Squid, a little barfed up. Let me show you around and we can talk." Johnny cupped a hand to his mouth. "Yo, Pino!" he barked. "Get your fat ass out here!" He smiled. "This is my actual muscle."

The door on the left side of the hallway opened; a huge bald man clad entirely in black stepped into the lobby, the gravity of his presence and mass such that Charlie found himself leaning both toward and away from him. Indeed, the man's face and not his size distinguished him from men of similar caste, for in a word it was odd. The lantern jaw and angry, thin-lipped mouth, while not common, broke no new ground. But the radical length and bizarre emergence

of the nose directly from a bony protuberance in the forehead — akin to the boss of a muskox minus the horns — and the lack of eyebrows, which caused his eyes to appear so deeply set that they were either hidden in shadow or absent altogether from their black sockets, created an alarming visual, and suggested either a congenital deformity or criminally botched cosmetic surgery.

“Pino’s from Brooklyn,” Johnny said, “in case you’re wondering.”

“Yeah, figured him from elsewhere. I gather he no speak de English.”

“Ha! Haven’t lost your wit, Squid. Pino’s what you’d call the strong, silent type.”

The goon stood there stonily with his hands clasping his longhorn silver belt buckle and his feet spread tactically in their black storm boots as if poised for violence at a moment’s notice. Now Charlie — recalling the service van parked out front — wondered if Ricky had ordered Johnny to solicit Pino for a task necessitating a cleanup crew, perhaps patiently waiting in the back of the service van for the call to bring their mops, buckets, and bone saws. Charlie took it all in stride. If Pino was there for that job, he looked perfectly suited for it. Charlie entertained little doubt that what you saw with Pino was what you got.

“Let’s walk and talk,” Johnny said. “I wanna show off the product.”

“I gotta say this is a little different.”

“Old school guy like you may find it strange, but believe me, mannequins are big money, especially in the boutique sector where we offer customized, high-end, models crafted by local sculptors, puppet-makers, and artisans to select clients around the country for premium prices. Chinese manufacturers mass-produce their shitty mannequins and specialize in bulk orders. You follow, Squid? Your eyes are glazing over.”

Charlie shifted his weight from foot to foot on the tacky, epoxy-covered floor. “Buddy’s

reticence is bothering me,” he said, nodding over his shoulder at Pino, standing there like a monolith. “I’m wondering if you haven’t clipped his tongue like one of those eunuchs, we read about in *1001 Arabian Nights*.”

Johnny shook his head. “Where do you come up with this shit, Squid? *Arabian Nights*? Did the Muslim Brotherhood get to you? Or maybe you just read too many books in the joint. You did what, a nickel? Lots of time to kill if you’re not a mark or someone’s bitch. Guys like us shouldn’t read too many books, makes us crazy.”

“On the contrary,” Charlie said, “guy like you might learn a few things.”

Johnny turned and said, “Say something, Pino.”

“Like what?” Pino said in a surprisingly high-pitched but raspy voice.

“Anything,” Johnny said. “Only don’t tell Squid to shut up or he might douse you with gasoline and set you on fire.”

Pino’s lips curled back, revealing a glittery metallic smile, which for a moment led Charlie to believe the man had teeth of steel, like Jaws from the Bond movie. Indeed, upon closer inspection, conventional stainless-steel braces wired Pino’s teeth. He was about to speak but thought twice about it.

Charlie sniffed with impatience.

“I was saying,” continued Johnny, “big money in the mannequin game when you commandeer the distribution network and move your own product into the supply chain. Doesn’t even have to be a front if we keep the Chinese under control — ”

“So you wanna corner the mannequin market,” Charlie said.

Johnny nodded and led him down the hallway to a set of swinging double doors and punched his way through. Charlie followed, Pino close behind, reeking of citrusy cologne — a

scent that reminded Charlie of Hai Karate, the cologne randy men with sideburns and moustaches wore when he was a kid.

Johnny hit a red wall lever and panels of fluorescent lights hanging from the high ceilings hummed into radiance and filled the space with cold, flickering light.

“The treasure vault,” Johnny said, sweeping his right arm like an impresario.

As they beheld what passed at first glance as an abode of the damned that a vengeful God had concocted, Charlie’s eyes felt like they might burst out of his head; he grew short of breath and started sweating profusely, beads of it rolling down his temples and cheeks. The visceral reaction to the contents of the warehouse caught him by surprise. He’d always thought he was made of sturdier stuff, not so easily rattled. He pulled a checked handkerchief from his pant pocket, mopped his brow, and tried to process what ballooned so monstrously before him — so unlike anything he’d ever encountered in his sixty years.

Johnny’s glass eye glistened. “You okay, Squid? You look green.”

Charlie gulped. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Let’s get on with this,” he said, blinking rapidly.

Posed before him were mannequins of every conceivable size and variety, some acrobatically or obscenely contorted, others in various stages of completion, and made of all manner of material — fiberglass, foam, wood, plastic and so on. Like figures in a catacomb, they stood in uneven rows or rested horizontally on metal shelves spanning the length of the warehouse floor; dismembered mannequin legs were heaped against the walls and waxen heads with empty eyes reposed on pedestals next to armless fiberglass torsos; and there were white boxes with *Mannequin House Inc.* stenciled on in black letters, overflowing with hands and feet.

Charlie saw realistic mannequins of men, women and children, abstract mannequins, black, gold and chrome-plated mannequins and ones tinted every color of the rainbow; there were ghost mannequins, plus-size mannequins and even pregnant ones. Mannequins wrapped in cellophane leaned against the cluttered workstation and those in need of repair occupied stainless steel tables like etherized patients.

“Well,” Johnny said at last. “Something for the whole family, huh?”

Charlie stood there gaping, unable to process it all.

Johnny grabbed his arm and led him deeper into the warehouse.

“They call these ones here *sexy* mannequins,” he said, nodding his glass eye to several voluptuous models in lascivious poses. “Made of high-quality fiberglass and sculpted in granular detail — they have detachable limbs and can be posed for lingerie or sex apparel. But I wouldn’t recommend these for sexual activity. We have an artisan in Chautauqua County — Native fellow — working on some beta models of those.” He stopped by a row of athletic models. “And these here are what we call sport mannequins, good for yoga poses, golf, soccer, skiing and so forth, buffed males and fit females.”

Charlie felt like he had as a kid when his mother would drag him into stuffy fabric stores and the needling blizzard of colors and textures rendered him almost blind. His tears and complaints never failed to provoke a crisp backhand from his mother, a perfectly acceptable response in her day.

“By the way,” Johnny said, turning to Pino, who fondled a pink foot from one of the boxes, “now that it comes to mind. Yo, Pino. Go out to the van and bring in those mannequins I scored from Solly, the jobber.” He paused. “Hey! Quit handling the fucking merchandise and pay attention. What’s the matter with this guy, Squid? What a loss for science if we don’t freeze

his brain when he dies. Pino!”

Pino released the foot.

“That’s better, now I want you to — ”

“Right now, boss? I have to take a wicked piss. Can I piss first?”

Johnny regarded Charlie with lidded eyes and smiled with the side of his mouth. “What did you say?” he hissed. “Repeat what you said.”

Pino flashed his braces. “Uh, that’s okay, boss. I’ll go get the dummy, sorry about that. I’ll piss outside.”

“Don’t piss outside, you jackass! Go piss in the can and then get the mannequins, is that so hard? Your man from Brooklyn said you were cool. Do I have to call him and tell him that he was wrong, that he’s a liar, that he lied to me, that he didn’t send me Jerry Korab, he sent me Jerry Lewis?”

Pino lurched off.

“You okay, Squid?” Johnny barked. “You look like ricotta.”

“Think I need some air,” Charlie whispered.

“Well, let’s finish up here and then you can get all the air you want.”

Charlie sat on a stool near the workstation. Beside him, on a cork work-surface, rested a statuette of the Virgin Mary in sky blue and white with gold piping and accents.

“The veneration of the Blessed Virgin is my bread,” Johnny said in hushed tones. “Isn’t she beautiful? An artisan from Catania makes them: hand paints them and uses actual gold foil. Cost a patrimony. And how I got it across the border, never mind. Seriously. Whenever I feel lost, I look to the Blessed Virgin for guidance. Mother Teresa once said that when she felt distressed she’d say this simple prayer, ‘Mary, Mother of Jesus, please be a mother to me now.’ I

say it myself when I'm out of sorts."

"You're barking up the wrong tree," Charlie said. "I'm agnostic."

Johnny glared at him. "What does that have to do with the Blessed Virgin?"

"Uh, the mother of God and all that?"

"Also the mother of those who venerate her, Squid. If you invoke the Blessed Virgin when you're jammed up or have fallen into evil, she'll come to your assistance and deliver you from Satan."

"I'll keep it in mind. Forgive my insensitivity. Now let's get on with this."

"Okay," Johnny said, pressing his palms together, "take a seat. I'm touchy when it comes to the Blessed Virgin."

"Listen, I thought I was square after that Felice job."

"My grandmother, *buon'anima*, could've whacked that puppet."

Charlie considered this then said, "What's up with buddy's face?"

Johnny shot him a look. "How do you mean?"

"Pino. His face. An accident or something?"

"The fuck you going on about, Squid? You're mocking Pino? Never met him before, know nothing about him and you're *mocking* him? What's wrong with you?"

"Forget I said anything."

"I'll do that, Squid."

"Go fuck yourself, Johnny."

"Easy, Squid. No need for harshness. But you mocked my man. Have to draw the line somewhere. Say three Hail Marys before bed tonight, Squid, as you examine your conscience."

He lifted a clawing plastic hand out of a box. "Jewelers use these for rings and watches or

bracelets when the wrists extend enough. To be honest, the hands and the feet creep me out more than the heads, but especially the hands.” He dropped the hand back in the box.

Charlie’s eye sockets ached.

“Okay, Squid,” Johnny said. “So I mentioned the Chinese. They own and control a big stake in the mannequin business; they mass produce their cheap product in China and have flooded the market with it. But we’re targeting an upscale demographic and offer better mannequins with greater variety. Long story short, we came into this when the Chinese tried to muscle a distribution network run by friends of our friends in Toronto and they reached out. We’re the cavalry.”

Charlie scoffed at taking on some Chinese syndicate.

“What’re you thinking, Squid?”

“The Chinese and the Russians? Toronto? I don’t like doing jobs up there anymore. Gun laws. And I hate the drive. Forget about it. Not for me.”

“When did you become such a Fredo, Squid?”

“Johnny — ” Charlie was going to say something he’d likely regret and stopped short. “I’m fucking tired,” he said.

Johnny pursed his lips and trained his good eye on Charlie. Five minutes passed in ringing silence.

Finally, Charlie said, “This is the last time.”

“That’s not for you or me to say now, is it? I’m just the messenger.”

“So what’s the name?”

Johnny smiled. “Ming.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not kidding.”

Charlie inhaled deeply and stood up. He tried to ignore the mannequins but found it impossible.

CHAPTER TWO

On an overcast Tuesday morning in early November, well after rush hour and long before lunch, Charlie crossed the Peace Bridge from Buffalo into Canada, meeting no resistance at Customs. Despite his criminal record, he'd only been stopped a few times, and never to great consequence. He'd legally changed his name from Calogero to Charlie after his stint in Cayuga State Prison, which may have explained it. Or maybe his age, unassuming demeanor and reserve rendered him beyond suspicion. Just visiting friends in Toronto, his usual line. But you could take nothing for granted. Any ornery or paranoid customs officer could arbitrarily decide to go medieval on you.

After an unobtrusive drive past Hamilton, a steel city as gritty and hopeful of reinvention and revivification as Buffalo, he found himself bumper to bumper on the QEW 401, inching toward Toronto, gnashing his teeth, throttling his steering wheel, and regretting his decision to start his car this morning.

A meeting had been scheduled with Rosario Scimé, an old Little Italy associate he'd asked to suss out the elusive Ming. Turned out Ming's real name was Wei Chong, a Chinese expat representing some heavy hitters back in the old country. Wei Chong never stayed in one place too long and never made a move without his imported muscle: four or five strong, dressed to the nines and armed to the teeth. Nobody messed with these guys, not even the Russians. Rosario, who'd run high-stakes poker games in Chinatown until the Triads pushed him out, still had contacts in the community. He owed Charlie a few favors and had been obliging.

The silvery towers of Toronto loomed large as Charlie exited the highway; he regarded them with mixed feelings. He'd spent a lot of time in Toronto over the years, for work and

recreation — a Blue Jays fan since the late 1970s — and he even hid out there for a stretch during the 1990s when things were too hot in Buffalo. Nice city, but no mistaking it for America. He switched on the radio and listened to the jazz station until a few minutes of buzzy freestyle by a du jour saxophonist with a complicated name drove him to find a classic rock station.

It took an hour to grind his way from the QEW 401 to Little Italy. He'd given himself ample time to make the noon meeting. He parked in a lot by the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church on Clinton Street and strolled down to the Cafe Diplomatic on College Street, a place he'd patronized since the 1970s. Remnants of Halloween — rotting pumpkins, deflated monsters, discarded masks — and the almost leafless trees made for bleak visuals; nevertheless, he felt buoyed with the prospect of seeing his old friend, Rosario, a man who could spin a yarn. That said, Charlie trusted no one with his business, and even kept Rosario in the dark about his true program, using the cover of seeking out a new contacts for his bosses, who had, by hook or by crook or sheer mafioso caprice, come into the business.

A few minutes early, he eased up to the bar — a blaze of mirrors, LED lamps, and multicolored liqueur and liquor bottles anchored by a preemptive panettone pyramid of gold and red foil — and ordered an espresso from a barista who bore a striking resemblance to a young John Turturro.

“How's it going?” the barista asked as he loaded the magnificent cherry-red Gaggia Deco Evo D and hit a chrome button.

“Can't complain,” Charlie answered, tempted to enunciate the barista's uncanny resemblance to the actor, but also cognizant of the likelihood that he'd heard it before, countless times. Charlie noted a number of cosmetic changes around the rapidly filling bar-cafe, including new art-deco chairs and tables, and mirror-tiled walls that created the illusion of space. “You

guys renovated since I last was here.”

“That was like three years ago.”

“Time flies.”

The barista served Charlie the espresso and slid a steel sugar bowl with a slender serving spoon beside his cup. Charlie stirred in two spoons of sugar and drank. Not the best espresso in the world — his tongue curled from the bitter aftertaste. The barista offered him a chaser of cold water; Charlie lifted the small glass and surveyed the bar-cafe for a free table and for the presence of anyone who might disapprove of *his* presence. The Calabrian *'Ndrangheta*, distinct from its Sicilian cousin, was spreading its tentacles throughout the city and beyond, but had for decades ruthlessly — though not always efficiently — maintained control of Toronto’s Little Italy.

Charlie hadn’t avoided life behind bars or death by being careless. Three years at Cayuga State Correctional came about from trumped up racketeering charges not as a result of his sloppiness, poor planning or loose lips.

“Anything else?” asked the barista.

“Waiting for a friend,” Charlie said. “You know, you look like ... like that actor.”

The barista, smiling crookedly, and perhaps frequently compared to John Turturro, waited for the anticipated name, but Charlie suddenly drew an embarrassing blank. He bit his lip and knuckled his temple, but it wouldn’t come.

“He was in that, uh, show what’s-it-called,” Charlie stammered.

Mouth open, the barista waited another beat, but hearing nothing further nodded and moved on to a leggy female customer who’d just mounted a barstool, had thrown her red leather clutch on the marble counter, and was fidgeting. Charlie turned away from the bar and found a

table mid-restaurant with a view of both exits and sat with his back to the mirror-tiled wall. He recognized no one; in the past, two minutes wouldn't transpire without seeing a familiar face or being summoned by someone familiar. But everything changes. People come, people go. The movie continues without interruption, everyone, even newcomers, playing their parts to perfection. And how did Charlie fit into this story? He hailed an ashen waitress with a mass of frizzy black hair and Alice Cooper eyes and requested a bottle of carbonated water.

"I'm waiting for a friend," he said.

He realized, with consternation, that the unorthodox application of white pancake — not quite like a classic mime, say, but more in the blotchy manner that Bob Dylan whitened his face during the Rolling Thunder Revue — explained the waitress's pallor. Young people were always making curious stabs at self-expression, so Charlie withheld judgment. As the waitress departed, he wondered if she was a student or an artist; her eyes had suggested the latter, and when she brought the green bottle of San Pellegrino to the table, he couldn't help but inquire if she was an artist.

"Uh, sort of," she said. "I'm in a band. I'm the bassist."

"Ah," Charlie said, raising his chin, somewhat disappointed she wasn't a painter or a sculptor. "What's your band's name?"

"The Puppets of Doom."

Charlie nodded; but as much as he wanted to ask about her makeup, he wanted to hear no more about her band. He couldn't imagine what kind of music they played, or the musty clubs and beery dives they headlined and the crowd those venues and their music drew. As merciful as a script intervention by a compassionate punch doctor, Rosario at last appeared at the front entrance in a red velour tracksuit and red kicks, accented with several kilograms of Italian gold

bling. Charlie did a double take to confirm it was him.

“Charlie the Squid,” Rosario announced from across the cafe, drawing everyone’s attention. “What a sight for sore eyes.”

Swinging his thick hips between tables as if working an invisible hula hoop, and greeting every third or fourth person with familiarity, Rosario wove his way to Charlie with his right hand opened as if he were about to grab someone’s face. Charlie shook his hand and the two embraced, exchanging pecks on the cheeks.

“You’re cutting quite the figure these days,” Charlie said, wincing at the pinch of Rosario’s civet-stemmed cologne fumes. “Like a Dyngus Day refugee.”

“Like a what?” he said.

“It’s a Buffalo thing, never mind.”

“Sounds like. But I must keep up appearances, you know. Play the part. Do my best Lefty Ruggiero. *Thirty years I’m busting my hump. What have I got?*”

Charlie smiled.

“You like that, huh? And you, Squid, is this your Machus Red Fox moment? You have that I-wanna-vanish-into-thin-air look. But I don’t think they even have a payphone in this joint anymore.”

“So what do you have for me, Rosario?”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you back in the day when you were hustling skinheads for quarters at Eugene’s Billiards — not to get too deep with the sharks. Now you are one, right? Ha. Eugene, God rest his soul, passed a few months back. Throat cancer. Don’t know why you’re asking about this dude — I guess business is business. So long as you throw that word into the blender everything’s hunky dory. But I have a bad feeling about these Chinese guys, man.

Maybe you should just forget about it. I mean, I'm not your boss, Squid, but this cat your people call Ming — Wei Chong — has another nickname. Folks in Chinatown call him Cobra."

"Sit down," Charlie said.

"Did you hear me?"

"Cobra. Yeah, I heard. Sit down. So he's got a big dick or something?"

Rosario tried to flag a wait staff. "Nah, not that," he said. "Has a massive Chinese tattoo on his back, big green cobra."

Charlie poured a few bubbling inches of the San Pellegrino into a glass and offered it to Rosario.

"I'm good," he said. "Need a drink drink. And I hear carbonation gives you gallstones — or maybe kidney stones — whatever. Read it online. Yeah, even me. But also, Squid, he's a badass, this Wei Chong. Kind of like a Kung Fu Bruce Lee thing, but his posse makes sure he keeps his hands clean, unless he wants to have fun. Anyway, everyone's scared shitless of him."

The waitress in whiteface approached the table but turned around and headed the other way.

"You know her?" Rosario asked, puzzled.

"She's the waitress," Charlie said, touching the bottle of San Pellegrino as if to evidence his deduction. "I think she painted her face."

"Yeah? I disapprove of young girls wearing makeup. Beautiful fresh young skin and they pollute it with foundation and slutty eyeliner and blush — Whore of Babylon shit, right there in the Bible. If I ever have a daughter, fuck wearing makeup. Hell, my son, too, if he ever starts."

"No, I mean she painted her face *white*, like a mime. You'll see what I mean." Charlie scanned the cafe but saw no sign of the waitress.

“You don’t have kids, right Squid?”

“Not that I know of.”

Rosario squeezed his eyelids. “Kids today respect nothing and only care about their cellphones and social media bullshit.”

A thin, androgynous waiter, his straight black hair combed or styled over his left eye like a patch, his right eye unusually large and vibrant, appeared at their table, offered them laminated red menus and asked if they wanted drinks to start.

“Campari and soda,” Rosario said. “Kick-starting my afternoon buzz.”

“Sounds good,” Charlie said. “I’ll have one, too. By the way, where’s the waitress brought the San Pellegrino. She had ... er, she was very pale.”

“Sir,” the waiter said. “Raymond and I are working today.” He nodded in the direction of another waiter, a broad-shouldered bald man with carotid tattoos.

“Raymond looks like he can handle himself,” Charlie said.

“Oh, he can. Alicia was scheduled today, but she called in sick this morning.”

“You sure?” Charlie said, rising in his chair and twisting his neck left and right in an effort to locate the waitress. “Hm, sorry about that. Just get us our drinks, please. We’ll order food in a minute.”

The waiter strode to the bar, placed the order with the barista and said something further, which caused the barista to glance in Charlie’s direction shaking his head. Then the barista and the waiter shared a chuckle.

“What are you looking at?” Rosario asked.

“Nothing,” Charlie said, rubbing his forehead and wringing his large hands.

“Tell me about the mannequins.”

Charlie stared at Rosario and though he noted the trademark goatee that roughened his appearance, his face as a whole escaped him. While he could distinguish individual features — nose, eyes, ears, mouth and so on — piecing them together to form a comprehensive visual of Rosario’s face in its entirety proved alarmingly impossible.

“You okay, Squid?”

“Yeah, yeah. Mannequins.”

Rosario flashed his yellow teeth. “When you said mannequins were a big racket, I thought you were bullshitting. But I looked into it. Crazy. Even dentists! And the Chinese are the mannequin kingpins. They mass produce them over there like toys and ship them her. But chintzy Chinese mannequins burn like torches in fires — shitty paint and glue they use. There’s competition now — better mannequins, handcrafted, customized, from all over the world — and the Chinese don’t like it one bit.”

The waiter brought lowball glasses of Dubonnet with orange twists and set them on the table. “Gentlemen?”

“Give us a minute,” Rosario said, “but bring some fried calamari — no offense, Squid. Make it a double order — what’s your name?”

“Jeffery,” the waiter said, his smile difficult.

“Jeffery, my American friend here we call the Squid. So it’s ironic, isn’t it?”

The waiter nodded and departed.

The hard-pressed lunch crowd shuffled, scraped, and hummed — a mix of trim moms with infants in chichi buggies or fidgety toddlers, multiethnic locals, shaggy bohemians, wide-eyed millennials and hipsters with gravid beards and piercings, students on cells and pads, and wayward business types in suits.

“I’m feeling off,” Charlie said, hand gripping his forehead.

“Migraine? My sister Claudia gets these wicked migraines, so bad sometimes she has to stay in a dark room with ice packs on her head.”

“It’s not a migraine. More like I’m having problems with my eyes.”

“Diabetes! The eyes go with diabetes. Everybody knows that. Remember Tommy Meatballs, the crank who used to mooch smokes at Eugene’s bar?”

Charlie vaguely remembered a silver-haired blowhard back in the 1990s when he was keeping low in Toronto. That he remembered Tommy Meatballs at all surprised him, so much of that cocaine-addled era smudged in his mind, or like an incomplete series of grainy photographs. One memory stood out.

“The boys got him wasted on hash brownies one night,” Charlie said. “He thought he’d be heroic and ate two. They were strong. He got so high he lost control of his bowels and shit himself. Then he passed out on Jersey Avenue, in an alley near his flat.”

“I remember that! Goddamn.”

The waiter delivered the steaming calamari in two red plastic baskets with a creamy dipping sauce and lemon wedges. The hot fried perfume of the calamari rings opened Charlie’s nostrils and made him forget about Tommy Meatballs.

“Two more minutes,” Rosario told the waiter, holding up two fingers of one hand while seizing a calamaro ring with the other and dipping it in sauce.

Charlie pierced a calamaro ring with his fork and squeezed a lemon wedge over it.

“So Tommy Meatballs,” Rosario said while chewing, “had diabetes but refused to change his eating and drinking habits— always going into insulin shock — and started losing his eyesight. Then they chopped off his feet because diabetes fucks up the circulation. He died bad,

Squid. Just saying”

“No need to die bad, ” Charlie said, struggling with the rubbery calamari.

“So Ming frequents Cube and the Orchid Nightclub in the Entertainment District. Drops wads on Cristal and Courvoisier. Never enters minus crew and a few bimbos in tow. Also visits this building on Wharfside Lane near the lake. Ever out there, stop at the Simply Frosted Cupcakery on Port Union Road up a ways. Their red velvet cupcakes should be illegal.” He pinched a fat roll under his red velour. “Wife’s a good cook, learned from her nonna. Eat like a beast at home. Hang with the boys and drink, maybe play cards, puff a doob, then hit Regina’s for pizza or sandwiches — other night spaghetti and meatballs, after Lisa made lasagna for dinner. Think I left a meatball on the plate?”

Charlie smiled and studied the menu. He recalled the Diplomatic serving a particularly greasy and awful but delicious panzerotto.

“Linguine with mussels,” Rosario announced. “I puffed sativa this morn from an Oregonian I met at the last Fallsview Poker Classic, and I could eat a horse right now.”

Charlie watched his friend polish off the calamari rings, still struck by his cubist face. It floated before him in grotesque geometric fragments. But rather than despair about the mysterious nature of this anomaly or disability — eye or brain malfunction? — Charlie focused on Rosario’s mouth, his yellow teeth, livery tongue, and masticating jaw.

When the food arrived, Charlie tucked into his panzerotto. It tasted like sand. He dropped his knife and fork, drank some San Pellegrino, and drifted off in his thoughts.

Time passed. Then he heard a voice in the distance. The voice got closer.

Rosario materialized. “I was *saying*,” he continued, mopping his plate with bread. “He spends time at Wharfside. My sources aren’t sure where he lives. His people own condo units in

Mississauga. And there's this luxury condo on Queens Quay off the highway that one of his girlfriends owns or rents. He often pulls up in a stretch limo —only time he doesn't have the posse surrounding him. Anyway, probably the best place to catch him is during the daytime at that office on Wharfside. I mean, Squid, why don't you get in touch with him legit? This is about mannequins, right?"

Perhaps it was the wisest course of action. Setting up a complex ambush at a nightclub or tracking Ming down to a fixed address and timing his comings and goings meant weeks of prep and legwork. It would've meant renting a room and covering lots of ground. The thought of traffic and dealing with Torontonians all day depressed him. But if he came up with a good front and reached out, maybe he could reach Wei Chong.

"Squid," Rosario said, "anything else?"

As if waking from a dream or a deep reverie, Charlie looked up and saw the waiter standing by his table with a blank expression, his exposed eye unblinking, and with a start remembered he was in Cafe Diplomatic with Rosario Scimé.

"Sir," the waiter said. A tomato splotch on the left breast pocket of his white shirt made it appear as though he'd been shot in the heart or as if it had been made to look like he'd been shot in the heart.

"I'm done here, Charlie said. "Just an espresso."

"Make that two of those and two anisettes," Rosario added.

"Just one anisette," Charlie said. "I'm good."

"Who said it was for you?" Rosario chuckled.

The waiter shuffled off and a black-aproned, frisky busboy with steel wool hair and ceramic braces on his teeth arrived with a plastic tray, cleared their plates, and wiped the table

with a blue cloth. The success of the Cafe Diplomatic, if not the foundation of reality itself, seemed to depend on how well the busboy did his job. That attitude will get him nowhere, Charlie thought, flattening his hands on the table and rising.

““Gotta take a piss,” he said and walked off to the back.

In the washroom, he peed at a reeking urinal. Then at the sink, he averted looking in the mirror and fixed on his hands, grappling like tiny wet wrestlers under the water jet. He glimpsed himself as he dried his hands with the sonic air-blower, and winced at how old and shabby he looked, like a skid from a noir film. He squared up to the mirror. He was starting to resemble his mother, he concluded with dismay.

He shut his eyes and cocked his ear. The faint strains of a song emanated from the ceiling, though not from any visible speaker. Someone in the flat above was spinning the tune. Charlie made out a muffled rhythmic drumbeat and Johnny Cash’s deep voice:

*And there are drums beyond the mountain
Indian drums that you can’t hear...*

On the highway Charlie joined the sluggish procession of throbbing brake lights westbound, wipers thumping, defogger roaring, eyes straining despite his glasses. Toronto faded behind him in the gray downpour, its radiance and air of entitlement muted. He drove leaning forward, gritting his teeth. Transport trucks swished past, inches away, splatting his car with large gritty blobs, testing his wipers, fraying his nerves.

Charlie switched on the radio and tuned in the jazz station: Bill Evans on piano. His nerves settled and the steady wiper thump acted like a hypnotic; he had no consciousness of driving, of guiding the Buick forward into the rain, toward Buffalo. In effect, accompanied by the delicate piano of Bill Evans, the car drove itself.

When Bill Evans turned to static, Charlie killed the radio.

Time passed; his mind drifted, isolate but still responsive to stimuli. This passive retreat from reality was something he'd not experienced before, at least not until recently, and far from being a terrifying, he found it comforting, much as a child would find comfort in a worn grey blanket. At one point, he thought he heard Johnny Cash again:

*And there are drums beyond the mountains
Indian drums that you can't hear
There are drums beyond the mountains
And they're getting mighty near ...*

But where was the music coming from? He checked his radio. It wasn't on. It wasn't on! He listened but could no longer hear the song. He only heard the wipers, the steady rain, and the plashing rumble of vehicles around him.

He continued along the highway toward the Peace Bridge, and once he reached the outskirts of Buffalo, City of Light, he burst into tears.

CHAPTER THREE

Monday morning started poorly. Charlie had popped a Clonazepam the evening before to ensure a restful night but slept through his alarm — a twin-bell tinny wind-up his Nonna Tomasina had favored for decades — and awoke an hour later than planned, so groggy and out of sorts it took him another hour to get his shit together. His appointment with Wei Chong’s people at 1000 Wharfside Lane had been scheduled for ten o’clock that morning and it was already seven. Barring difficulties at the border or heavy traffic, it was a two-hour drive. He hadn’t even made coffee yet and needed to costume up, at minimum a twenty-minute task.

Though reeking of mothballs and stale sweat, he’d found a beige linen suit at Goodwill and paid too much for a pair of vintage tortoiseshell glasses at the Pawn Kings so thick-lensed they must’ve belonged to a legally blind person. Moreover, that lunkhead Pino, Johnny Morabito’s kummelweck-brained henchman, ordered the day before to deliver a sample mannequin to Charlie for the meeting — ideally one of the high-end handcrafted numbers that sold for upwards of ten grand — had instead dropped off an adult-sized wooden Pinocchio marionette, jointed and strung like its smaller, workaday cousins, salvaged from a postmodern art installation formerly under the auspices of a bankrupt Manhattan art gallery.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Charlie had said upon seeing the hulking Pino with the puppet at his door, cradled obscenely in his arms.

“What?” Pino said, his braces glinting. “It’s from *la Gilda di Pinocchio*.”

“But it’s not a mannequin!” Charlie had shouted. “They wanted to see a mannequin. I repeat, a fucking mannequin!”

“Well, it’s kind of like one, no? Dress it in different clothes and such, change the hat, I don’t dig the hat.”

Charlie thought, ‘If I go inside, open the drawer of the console table, and take out my three-eighty, I’ll shoot this cretin between the eyes and this episode of my life will mercifully be over.’ Instead, he told Pino he couldn’t attend this meeting with an overgrown Pinocchio. We’re supposed to be a serious mannequin outfit, he said, not a Disney act. But Pino pointed out that it wasn’t his call and that he personally found the marionette loathsome. This was all Johnny’s doing, he asserted — and likely Ricky’s, Charlie inferred. Johnny and Ricky were trying to fuck him up, make him look ridiculous to these Chinese guys. That shit about Wei Chong — Ming! — bullshit. They just wanted Charlie to go there and fail so badly that it would be death by Triad. Not even handing out a contract with his name on it to have it done proper. Pino refused to take back the Pinocchio and forbade him as per Johnny’s directive to even consider going to the Mannequin House; now Charlie faced meeting the Chinese with a giant freaking Pinocchio in tow.

The clock ticked. The ticking sounded like a gong. Charlie loaded his moka and set it on the burner. While it heated, he rushed to the bathroom, undressed, and jumped in the shower, letting the water run cold over his head to shock him awake and it did. He toweled off violently in an effort to restore warmth to his goose-pimpled skin and still his chattering teeth. After he dried himself and dressed, he felt invigorated and ready to take on the challenge awaiting him.

He strapped his Cold Steel Counter TAC II fixed blade to his left calf muscle, and tucked an Urban Edge push dagger with a 2.5-inch blade and a Kray-Ex handle into a leather sheath stitched to the back of the embossed black leather belt he wore exclusively when on a job — on which he’d never notched his successes.

He pulled the belt tighter than usual, as it felt loose. Granted, it clashed with the linen suit, but in the end, besides certain fusspots, busybodies, and pathological fashionistas, did people really notice belts? Belts tell you little about a person, less than shoes, which often speak volumes about the wearer. Charlie felt the black belt would be no issue and shooed loitering doubts from his mind.

He drank his coffee black and sweet by the hoary kitchen window, wincing with every sip but resolute. As the caffeine coursed through his veins like an electrical charge, excitement mounted in his breast.

The linen suit — originally white but discolored from hanging in an armoire for years, as the red-suspended manager of Goodwill explained — which Charlie had only eyeballed for size, turned out to be too large, and made him look thinner and shabbier than intended. And he could see almost nothing through the thick-lensed tortoiseshell glasses — and couldn't see how ludicrous he looked in the mirror.

And while it all seemed too outlandish to fly, in reality the most ridiculous falsifications sometimes pass for the truth; and as most people know, truth is often stranger than fiction. Were he to approach a meeting involving Chinese wise guys, mannequins, and Neapolitan artisans straitjacketed to a conventional mindset, wearing a business suit and business spectacles, he might be fingered as a fraud.

But Charlie had slyly adopted the persona of an Italian intermediary — perhaps artistic but eccentric in any case — likely drawn to an unconventional lifestyle and this odd line of work. The more eccentric the portrayal the better, he felt, though you had to remind yourself that a disguise was an instrument and not a theatrical performance or a thing in itself — though analogues existed between the vocations, if not shared objectives. Key in both cases was

emotional truth and consistency, and enough details to create a compelling impression, that is, a larger *illusion* of reality, where this pseudo-being *Giulio Messina* could flourish with all his quirks and pseudo-verities.

Charlie put on a pair of old tan moccasins that he'd unearthed from a moldy box in the basement. Then he wrapped a red scarf around his throat and flew out the door.

The Buick struggled down the snow-swept street; the windows fogged up and Charlie almost drove through a stop sign, hitting the brakes at the last second and skidding half way through the intersection before skidding to a stop. Fortunately no pedestrians or cars were around, and he proceeded through the intersection with his heart in his throat and his stomach muscles fluttering, gripping the steering wheel as though it threatened to fly away.

He drove as fast as he could given the road conditions — plow trucks had yet to deploy, the drivers likely torpid from seasonal debauchery. But Charlie had his own impairments slowing him. He'd forgotten his sunglasses, and the glare of the sun — the sky so blue after days of cloud it hurt you — on the snow almost blinded him; and with all landmarks obscured by glare he lost his bearings. He pulled over to the curb and climbed out of his car, dazed and disoriented. Black and yellow spots swirled before his eyes. He rubbed the eyes, but the spots persisted.

"Hey mister, can't park there," cried someone from a boarded up storefront with a shredded inflatable Santa fluttering from the broken window of the flat above it.

Charlie tried to identify the irksome mouthpiece, but the black and yellow spots floating before him like phantom billiard balls made this impossible. He rubbed his eyes again and this time achieved a measure of clarity. A large-skulled skeletal figure in the storefront entrance, wrapped in a crimson shawl that looked like a Persian rug, waved to him. He couldn't tell if it was man or woman; the alien countenance threw him.

He continued to the Peace Bridge exit and joined late-morning traffic, heavy but moving, the roads at least salted. He checked the dash clock: 8:10. He'd be a few minutes late; that didn't worry him. But walking into the meeting without the mannequin sample was a mistake, and he refused to spring the hideous Pinocchio on them.

He pulled up to 1000 Wharfside Lane — a bank-sized building of light yellow brick — at 10:30 and idled, listening to Wes Montgomery's "Satin Doll," a song he'd enjoyed when sung by Ella Fitzgerald with the Duke Ellington Orchestra, though Wes's lack of lyrics didn't lessen its swing. *Cigarette holder, which wigs me over my shoulder, he digs me* — Charlie couldn't remember the rest.

A few cars sat in the lot next to the building, but he saw no activity. He parked on the street. More unpleasant things existed than getting blocked in a parking lot whilst fleeing for your life, but not many. He put on his tortoiseshell glasses, smoothed his linen suit, and exited the car carrying a manila envelope with images of the Italian sculptor Willie Verginer's work, with whom neither Charlie nor the organization had any relationship, but having once seen photos of Verginer's remarkable wooden sculptures in a waiting room magazine, Charlie thought they'd be perfect for promotional purposes.

At the last moment, despite vowing not to do it, he opened the trunk, grabbed the Pinocchio, and decided to present it to Wei Chong's people, more as a good-natured stunt than a real demonstration of product. He stood gnawing on his knuckle and debating the plan's merits and hazards. If Pinocchio spelled Charlie's end, so be it: you can't live fearing your own death. If you do, you're already dead.

He pulled the Pinocchio out of the car trunk; he could've been unloading a dead man. And it smelled funny, not woody as one would expect, or of paint and glue; it smelled garlicky of

all things, as if crushed garlic had been rubbed over its vapid face and clothes — silly red lederhosen, Prussian blue bow tie, and Tyrolean hat, like a freak Austrian yodeler or malformed beer meister. It must've weighed thirty or forty kilos, loose-jointed and clattering like a sack of bocci balls as Charlie wove his way across the street peering over the dense lenses of his tortoiseshell glasses. He paused to better grip the bucking puppet, then limped up the paved path to a single steel-mesh glass door — the only signage the numeral 1000 in black steel above it — with an intercom mounted to its right and two red-flashing security cameras pointing from its transom.

Pinocchio grew uncooperative as Charlie tried to hit the buzzer, knocking its head against the intercom and thrashing its limbs in what seemed like a deliberate and devious effort to stop him from gaining entrance. It was as though the puppet had been warned not to enter. Finally Charlie dropped it to the pavement and pressed the buzzer. Shortly a man responded over the speaker.

“What?”

“Hi, there. *Buongiorno* —”

“Speak up!”

“I am, er — I have a meeting scheduled.”

A long silence ensued.

Maybe Charlie hadn't spoken loudly enough or the intercom had malfunctioned. He footed the puppet's nose. The inkling to press the buzzer again proved overpowering.

“What?” the voice said.

“I have a meeting scheduled. About mannequins from Italy.”

“You're late.”

“There was a mix up.”

“What is that thing?”

Charlie lifted Pinocchio by the shoulders in what amounted to a full nelson.

“That your boyfriend?” the voice said.

“It’s Pinocchio. A promotional item.”

Another silence followed. Charlie stood there, rocking from foot to foot, thoughts galloping. Pinocchio had fallen still and also seemed to be waiting. Charlie checked his watch: almost eleven. People liked fucking with other people. The tortoiseshell glasses pinched his beak. Why do people wear these stupid things? Lighter, sleeker models existed. Then again, that’s probably why the previous owner had pawned them off: they were asshole glasses.

At last the lock clicked. He opened the door and dragged Pinocchio in by the arms. He entered a cavernous spartan foyer with a strip of red vinyl leading from the entranceway to a large steel desk positioned against the opposing wall. Behind the desk sat a thick-necked man dressed in a maroon uniform with gold trim — more fitting for a seneschal than a typical security guard — reading a newspaper.

Charlie lugged the fractious Pinocchio along the red vinyl strip. He saw no sign of mannequins or indeed of any business dealings whatsoever. The walls were uniformly painted urine yellow with several doors presumably leading offices and restrooms; a skylight on the ceiling beamed warm rays. Must’ve been a bank in a prior incarnation.

It smelled of nothing in there, not even ventilated air, often with its own peculiar aroma. Charlie continued to the desk and as he drew nearer, the security guard or clerk came into sharper relief. He wasn’t Asian — at least he didn’t think so, though the man had straight black hair — odd, he resembled someone he knew or had known. He drew closer; then, some five or

six yards away from the desk, Charlie stopped in his tracks and let Pinocchio fall with a thunk to the floor.

The guy at the desk, improbably, looked like Mimmo Macaluso, the first man Charlie had ever whacked. How was this possible? He had almost decapitated Mimmo.

“The fuck’s your problem?” the guard asked. “Come here. Not gonna walk there.”

Charlie grabbed Pinocchio and slowly continued to the desk, which held two flickering monitors and a keyboard. To the guard’s right sat an old-fashioned black telephone, and next to it stood a black porcelain figurine of an Italian carabinieri that might have been a paperweight or a memento of an Italian vacation.

The guard shook his newspaper. “Get this,” he said, spreading the paper and reading from it. “A man has *survived* after being swept over the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. The man was then found *sitting on rocks* at the water’s edge, below an observation platform for the Journey Behind the Falls attraction. Police describe him as a person *in crisis*.” The guard leaned forward. “Imagine what he felt like at that moment? What a loser he must’ve felt like? How do you go over Niagara Falls and survive? I *ask* you.”

“He must’ve been depressed,” Charlie said, spooked by the guard’s resemblance to Mimmo. He even had a scar on his neck.

“How do you think he feels now? Not happier. He can’t escape this life. He tried, man. But sometimes you can’t, no matter how hard you try, you feel me? Sometimes, having reached the end of your tether, the water calls you and you take the plunge, hoping for peace at last from the raging internal war, relief from the pressure, the pain of being alive. You, sir, look awfully familiar to me. Have we met?”

“Is that you, Mimmo? Tell me it’s not you.”

“Mimmo? Who is this Mimmo?”

“Look, never mind. I had a meeting scheduled with Wei Chong’s people.”

“Whose people?”

“Wei Chong.”

“You mean Ming, that crook. Owes me fifty bones for the Super Bowl. Hasn’t paid yet and next time I see him I’m gonna Taze his ass and shake it out of his pockets.”

“So he’s not around? I mean, his people.”

“His *people*? Buddy — what did you say your name was?”

“Giulio. Giulio Messina. I’m with — ”

“The Pinocchio outfit, yeah. Intriguing. I don’t know what *people* you’re talking about. I mean, Ming clubs around with his hip hop crew, but they have zero to do with the business. I’ll concede *he* works for us. But not those metrosexuals he hangs with, not *them*. Anyway, you were s’posed to be here for ten.”

“A mix-up with the mannequins. They gave me this, which any idiot can see isn’t a mannequin, instead of a higher-end model we represent.”

The security guard frowned. “Mannequins? I heard nothing about *mannequins*. But the Pinocchio thing, hm, I think it’s got legs.” He paused with a straight face then smiled. “I mean it’s really got *legs*.”

Charlie glanced at the puppet’s beige-stockinged stick legs and the Mickey Mouse patent black shoes on its feet and couldn’t help feeling foolhardy. “Look,” he said, “I don’t mean to break balls, but can I talk to someone in charge? I didn’t come here to shoot the shit with a security guard.”

“What makes you think I’m a security guard?”

“That uniform, for one thing. And you’re sitting there reading the paper, aren’t you, like you had nothing better to do until I showed up? And you answered the buzzer. I mean, if you’re not a security guard or a receptionist, what are you — the CEO?”

“Listen, Giulio, You’re having a rough go of it. The clothes tell the story — by the way, groovy specs — and that barn waft I caught when you approached the table.”

The black telephone rang with a European rattle and the security guard snatched up the receiver and brought it to his ear.

“Yeah,” he said. “He’s right here.” He looked at Charlie and listened for a long spell, nodding. “No,” he said finally. “No, not that. It’s — what, no — Pinocchio. That’s right. Pinocchio.” He listened for another moment and said, “Okay.” Then he hung up and clasped his hands together but said nothing.

“Who was that?” Charlie asked.

“Not important. Tell me something. What’s your name again?”

“Er, Giulio Messina.”

“Ah, right, Giulio. By the way, do I detect a northern drift in your vowels?”

“Spent time in Buffalo.”

“Can’t mask that, can you? Well, Giulio, been a little mix-up. Not an imbroglio exactly, too strong. You must be Italian, I can tell. I’m Filipino, but some Italian blood on my mother’s side — Pugliese. Been to Italy but never Puglia. People say I look more Italian. I swing both ways know what I mean. We’re all cousins. Anyway — don’t get me started man oh man — I think someone talked to your boy and they misunderstood what he was saying. They thought he was trying to broaden distribution for his CBD products.”

“I was sent here to discuss the distribution of mannequins crafted in Italy, very nice ones,

I can show you pictures.”

“Why didn’t you say so? Picture’s worth a thousand words they say.”

Charlie opened the manila envelope, shook out the photos, and fanned them over the desk. The security guard lowered his head for a moment then sat up in his chair.

“Heck,” the guard said, dropping his finger on a photo and gaping at Charlie. “I friggin’ know this work! Oh yeah. Saw it at an exhibition in Venice few years back with the missus on our second honeymoon. This is the Italian artist Willy Verginer. My *God*. You represent Willy Verginer?” His hand reached for the telephone.

Charlie was caught off guard. “Er, yes,” he stammered, “it is the work of Willy Verginer, how’d you — well, no, we don’t exactly represent him, ah well, some of his work we do, as it pertains to mannequins — let me be clear. I thought, as an example of — of Italians in the mannequin field. I mean, with Ming and his people — Wei Chong.”

The security guard’s hand withdrew from the telephone and picked up a photo of a girl carved from wood with floral eyes and arms outstretched in a charming suspension of gesture. He moved it to and from his face then almost touched it to his nose.

Charlie squeezed Pinocchio’s shoulders so hard stuffing burst free. What a mistake it had been to bring it.

“Willy Verginer, all right,” the guard said, nodding. “No mistaking it. He’s what you call *sui generis*. You stock his work?”

“Uh, yes,” Charlie said, his mouth dry as dust. “It’s in storage at the moment. I’ll, um, talk to my Italian — ”

“Giulio,” the guard said, shaking with laughter. “We aren’t interested in *art*, guy. Do you see any *art* here? Willy Verginer creates art. We don’t touch it. Not with a ten-foot pole. We

wouldn't have a clue dealing art. We'd be like blind kids grasping for crayons. What do we know from crayons? And who decides? Who decides what is and what isn't a masterpiece and how much that masterpiece is worth? Commodities — edible, inedible, electronics and so on are how we roll. And CBD has real potential with good distribution. Am I making myself clear? We don't need your stinking mannequins.”

“But you said — ”

“I said nothing. Just wanted to see it up close, and if you'd actually drag it in here. And you did. You deserve a hand for that. I mean, applause. But it has no other value except perhaps as a novelty act for children's parties — might freak them out — or some kinky sexual scene. By the way, Willy Verginer didn't assemble that, did he?”

“You know he didn't. What about the meeting?”

“Have your man call Ming and talk real business, forget this mannequin shit.”

“What's your name?”

“You wanna ask me out on a date or something?”

“Is that you, Mimmo?” He swallowed.

The security guard reared his head. “You're a bit crazy, right? A wee loco?”

“I fucking killed you.”

“Buddy, I am not Mimmo. And if I was, maybe you didn't kill me, right?” He shook the newspaper. “You know, a lot of people who jump over Niagara Falls aren't even suicidal,” he said. “It's the rushing water. Draws them in. It's magnetic. They say when Marilyn Monroe was filming that movie *Niagara*, the crew had to restrain her from the stone abutment and railing at Table Rock. You've been?”

Charlie nodded.

The guard smiled. “So gather up Pinocchio, maybe put him on your shoulders and piggyback him out of here. Look at that stupid face. Had a dentist with a face like that.”

Charlie grabbed the marionette and dragged it down the red vinyl strip to the entrance door. He heard the telephone rattling as he exited the building.

Lightheaded, he removed the tortoiseshell glasses and continued across the street to his car. One of Pinocchio’s shoes fell off and he doubled back to retrieve it.

He stuffed Pinocchio into the trunk, determined to torch it later. He warmed up the car before putting it in drive. His thoughts kept slipping away like little blobs of mercury, none cohering. He put the car in gear and watched the world seemingly split in half as he drove through it. Everything slid by, all the bisected scenery, the halved trees and houses, storefronts. He knew, or his body knew, to head to the highway, and he found the exit soon enough, but had no consciousness of operating the Buick, which seemed to drive itself. At one point, he heard scuffling in the trunk, then thumping. Ridiculous. Then he thought he heard muffled sobbing. But he wouldn’t entertain the idea that Pinocchio had somehow become animate. He didn’t believe in fairy tales.

Scenery flashed by, but it didn’t move him; he had no sense of the tangible world rushing by, its structures, its hues, or its significance. Not everything means something, not every coincidence, every repetition. Things happen again and again. Nothing’s new.

A man with a blood-red tongue spoke to him. Charlie answered mechanically. *You don’t look well, sir.* I don’t feel well, sir. *Do you have anything to declare?* Only that I don’t feel well, sir. No mention of a puppet. No search for it either. It is what it is. You’re more likely to find meaning through immediate context.

A siren stirred him from his thoughts. He was cruising along South Park Avenue in Buffalo. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw police lights flashing. The police car sped up, flanked him, and the officer gestured to pull over. Charlie eased the Buick to the curb, in front of a variety store with several loud teenagers in neon parkas exiting its doors. They looked toward the Buick, bending their knees to get a better look at Charlie.

The officer didn't immediately exit his car. The youths continued gawking. Then a man in work clothes and a Russian hat passed with a burlap-wrapped Christmas tree over his shoulder. The youths followed him, crying taunts. Charlie would've enjoyed watching the man stop and throttle a few, but they would have overwhelmed him. The man kept walking, ignoring the youths, and they relented at the next corner, where two teenaged girls in white parkas and hot pink lipstick squealed upon seeing them.

The officer finally exited the police cruiser, tugging his holster and palming his walkie-talkie. He nudged his cap and stepped toward the Buick. Then he stopped, turned around and returned to the cruiser. Charlie grew impatient, but as he had nowhere to be at that moment, he shut his eyes and retreated to his cloudy space. He hadn't been there in a few days. How lovely. He reclined, stretched out his limbs, and breathed.

A tap at his window made him jerk his head around. The officer stood there in sharp silhouette, face shadowed. Charlie rolled down his window, squinting at the light slabbing over the officer's broad shoulder.

"Sir," said the officer, "you were driving erratically. Have you been drinking?"

"What, me? No, no. I came off the freeway —"

"Not even a little holiday cheer, sir?"

"Not even virgin eggnog, officer. On my mother's eyes."

“Driver’s permit and registration, please.”

Charlie handed the latex-gloved officer his documents.

After a cursory inspection, the officer said, “Please exit your car, sir. Slowly. Don’t make any sudden movements.”

Charlie had trouble unlatching his seatbelt. Sweat poured off his brow. He vainly pulled at the belt, glancing at the silhouetted officer, hand at his dark holster.

“Hurry it up in there!” the officer barked, turning his wide shoulders.

Finally Charlie freed himself of the seatbelt and opened the door. He stumbled as he exited the car, pitching forward to the wet, salted asphalt. Hands tangled in the twisted folds of his jacket, he failed to break the fall and landed with his full weight face-first, forehead and nose grating salt and grit, chin shredding down to the bone. He didn’t black out, though he wanted to shut his eyes and fall asleep and wake up several weeks later in a warm clean bed, for he knew he’d mucked up his face. He turned his head toward his car and blood and filth and skin dripped off his cheek. His nose bubbled blood and his chin burned as the cold air touched its tattered tissues and exposed white bone. He shut his eyes and for a moment felt warm and euphoric. Maybe he was dead, or dying.

Then the teenagers’ cries rose like cheers at a sporting event — and when Charlie glanced under the Buick he saw their boots dancing on the pavement.

Charlie could also feel the dark presence of the officer, and he started shaking: first his hands, then his limbs, and then his entire body shook. He heard the walkie-talkie crackle and the officer chattering.

He stopped shaking; his sinuses filled with blood, and he tasted blood thickening in his mouth. He turned to his other shoulder to better see the officer, who stood there talking on the

walkie-talkie with his back to the west and the sun descending behind him, and he couldn't make out any details save his thickness and bulk. Charlie raised his head and opened his bloodied mouth to speak, but nothing came.

He heard the teenagers as if from a great distance. He regarded the officer's black boots as objects from a terrible dream, and yet he felt no fear. He felt the resigned shock of a prey animal in the teeth of a predator.

Charlie felt no fear, that is, until the officer got down to one knee, and with a gloved hand touched his shoulder. It was not a kind touch, not a gentle touch. It could've been the hand of Satan. He recoiled from it.

"Hey, Squid," the officer said. "Got yourself jammed up good this time, huh?"

And it took a moment to dawn on Charlie that the officer had called him by his nickname, the name that people in the life called him, the name that only people who *knew* him had the temerity to call him. He began shaking violently again; this time he felt afraid, and he could not readily pinpoint why until the officer bent closer to him and showed his face. When Charlie saw it was the smiling face of Mimmo Macaluso, he shut his eyes and wouldn't open them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sofia Scozzari, née Squillaci, daughter of Rocco Squillaci, Charlie's deceased first cousin, and his wife Josey, sat on one of two central blue satin chairs at the crystal-and-silver accented head table, bunching around her as many rustling folds of her wedding dress as she could and straightening her tilted tiara against a backdrop of sheer, blue-lit white curtains. Her new husband, Gaetano, a black-haired, feline man, with large liquid eyes inherited from his father — in tuxedo at a table with other members of his family, flown in from Sicily for the occasion — eased himself into the remaining blue satin chair, left of the bride, leaned to her and said something that made her laugh and exhibit to all watching a hint of the equine not evident when she kept her mouth shut.

Other members of the bridal party, a dozen all told — including the bald best man and maid of honor, in glossy blue mirror organza — and precisely choreographed, also took their seats at the head table, on chairs with white satin slipcovers in contrast to the bride and groom's blue. The best man sat to the bride's right and the maid of honor to the groom's left, with the groomsmen and the bridesmaids following suit in an alternating male-female pattern, until they were all seated. An opulent arrangement of blue lilies centred the table, and single blue lilies in thin glass vases complemented each place setting, which featured vintage silver, dark blue linens, and floating blue candles in crystal. Clearly hours of painstaking preparation had been spent on just this portion of the proceedings to achieve the desired aesthetic and tone.

Charlie's eyes throbbed and his face hurt.

A round of applause issued from the captivated guests, appreciative of the harmonious if blue-heavy presentation of the wedding party. But before the applause faded, people started clinking glasses with their silver, urging the groom to kiss his bride. What began as a sporadic tinkle swelled to a cacophonous din as everyone joined in, and continued until the blushing groom stood up, helped his bride to her feet — unfurling her like a white silk parachute — and kissed her lips, much to the delight of the roaring and cheering guests.

Meanwhile, Charlie sat at a table near the swinging kitchen doors of the banquet hall — Lucarelli's in Lackawana — with his sister Gina and his nephew Anthony, and Amir, Anthony's guest. Charlie passed no judgment on his nephew, or on Amir, whom he liked for his respectful manners and for being a good friend to Anthony. The two got along like brothers, but also like sisters.

A ripe scent of violets filled the air that disagreed with Charlie and caused him to violently sneeze, almost unravelling his bandages. Gina, in aubergine silk, must have overspritzed the perfume, as the floral table centerpiece featured no violets. But a hothouse's compass of flowers and bouquets trembled and effused throughout the hall.

Anthony had on a tight-fitting dark blue suit and elongated bronze-colored shoes that Charlie couldn't help ogling. Either the kid had enormous feet or he was styling. Amir had worn an elegant black Jodhpuri suit that Charlie admired; the kid was confident and comfortable with himself. More than Charlie could admit at that moment. He felt squirmy in his own skin, and the charcoal pinstripe suit he'd selected fit him so loosely that Gina felt compelled to pin the darts of the jacket to reduce the ludicrous drape effect. The billowy trousers enveloped his fleshless legs like flour sacks.

People passed him and gawked at his still-bandaged face, even people he knew, who

perhaps didn't recognize him in that get-up, or carried on that pretense. He still had a week or so to go before the bandages came off. Vanity precluded him from wearing his glasses over them. Even when his sister and Anthony greeted family and old friends and introduced Charlie, people's reactions were muted at best. Though they treated Gina and Anthony warmly enough, no one enjoyed seeing him, the smiles as fraudulent and slimy as false teeth in a glass. No one asked how he'd come by his injuries — something he found bizarre and dispiriting, but upon further thought quite logical. You reap what you sow in this life — the old chestnut. What had he sown? Had he contributed one good thing to the world? Perhaps he'd neutralized some negative elements, forestalling further harm and mayhem, but what had he *contributed*? How many people thought fondly of him, or thought of him at all? How many people would attend his funeral? He glanced at his sister. It would be a small turnout.

Two other guests joined their table, Domenic Cicco and his wife Mafalda, a middle-aged, childless Batavian couple, somehow related to Charlie and Gina. They never missed family functions and always wore the same knowing smirks, as though stockpiling mental notes on everyone — anything remotely negative or contrary — to share later, when they were in bed holding hands and staring at the ceiling, rehashing each detail with hilarity, and reliving each exquisite moment of discovery. Indeed, seated there in her amaranthine satin costume and towering beehive, Mafalda stood out like a zaftig beacon; and Domenic's Stalinesque moustache alone would've disqualified him from any pantheon, self-conceived or not.

"That was a lovely ceremony," Mafalda declared.

"Yes, moving," said Gina, eyes rolling.

Anthony and Amir nodded in affirmation. It was a fine ceremony, heartfelt. Charlie had no recollection of it save a blur of empty faces and votary candles trembling as Father Pirrone,

arms raised, head bent, performed the ceremony. While Charlie had once enjoyed the cool tranquility of churches, if not their religiosity, St. Anthony's had felt unwelcoming on this occasion. He didn't belong, and his presence there was unwarranted and hypocritical. And greeting Father Pirrone after the ceremony — he was utterly depilated, verging on obesity and foul-breathed — then answering questions about the past, the present, and the future, further alienated him from the experience, and convinced him that he should never visit a church again under any circumstances. It's not that he felt the forces of good closing in on him. The truth is, he felt nothing, neither the presence of good nor evil. What he felt was inevitability.

“Charlie,” Domenic said, leaning over confidentially, “is it true what I hear?”

“What did you hear, Dom?”

“This is a small city, Charlie. You think people don't know your business, but believe me, they do. I hear you're splitting for Sicily.”

“Maybe I am. What's your point, Dom?”

“So, I'm thinking, Charlie's getting work done before he goes to Sicily. Maybe you're thinking of settling down and needed freshening up for those picky Sicilian gals. Just being a rich Americano doesn't cut it anymore, right? Sicily belongs to the European Union now. Those cats pay attention to fashion and so on. You'll be hard-pressed to find a fatso in all of Sicily or someone unstylish. They take care of themselves in a way we couldn't — even the men, they groom and lube and cream themselves like women.”

“What're you talking about?” Gina asked, already on her second glass of wine.

Charlie circled his face. “Dom thinks this is to impress the gals in Sicily.”

“Just saying, not a bad idea to beautify yourself before you jump back in.”

“He had an accident,” Gina said. “Bandages come off next week.”

“Were you riding a motorcycle?” Mafalda asked, squeezing a roll.

Domenic turned to his wife, said nothing, and then turned back to Charlie. “She’s just asking if you fell off a motorcycle and scraped your face. It happened to our old neighbor, this kid Mario. Went for a slide and, brutal, you know.”

“Motorcycle?” Gina said. “It’s friggin’ January, Dom. Who rides a motorcycle in January? Maybe in Batavia they ride motorcycles in the winter, but not here.”

“No need to get testy,” Domenic said. “We’re just talking. Right, Charlie?”

“A little thought goes a long way,” she said.

“They’re about to make a toast,” Anthony said. “Raise your glasses.”

“Is that champagne, Dom?” Mafalda asked. “Did they serve champagne?”

“Prosecco,” he said.

“Ugh, Prosecco — the headache stuff. I’m not drinking that.”

“I’ll drink Marie Antoinette’s if she doesn’t want it,” Gina said in a voice that sounded thrown by a drunken ventriloquist.

Charlie raised a hand to his mouth, and bowed his head. Gina caught his eye and clacked her jaw. The feeling that she wasn’t his real sister came and went. At times he detected something wooden in her appearance: her skin tone; the way her jaw opened and closed; the heavy, almost audible eyelids. And this business with her voice: the more she drank the more she sounded like someone else.

The best man stood by the seated couple with a microphone in his fist and began droning on, his voice reverberating throughout the banquet hall. Diaphanous strings that dangled from the ceiling appeared to manipulate his head and limbs. Charlie watched with quiet horror but felt compelled to tell someone. No one would meet his eyes. He saw Mafalda bent over, peering at a

silver sugar bowl to see if her hair was in place. She caught Charlie looking at her and shot him an unnatural sidelong glance, the eyeball a red-veined ivory marble. Anthony and Amir exchanged words behind hands raised to their faces and touching at the fingertips for secrecy.

One of the dangling strings drew taut and the best man lifted his glass, proposing a toast to the bride and groom. All the guests followed suit; then everyone drank and applauded. Gina's jaw clicked and she poured more wine into her mouth. More toasts followed, then Father Pirrone, his face seemingly painted bright red, took the microphone and uttered grace in a voice that sounded scratchily prerecorded.

Stiff servers in starched whites and black bolo ties served the wedding soup — which Charlie found cruelly salty — and shortly after brought plates of cantaloupe wedges and prosciutto. The soft, spongy cantaloupe disagreed with Charlie and he spat it into his napkin. Watching him with unblinking marble eyes, Mafalda leaned to Domenic and whispered in his ear. Domenic nodded and bared his piano teeth.

Voices rose and glasses tinkled again and this time Charlie, feeling vertiginous, didn't look up. More dishes arrived; lasagne, veal, chicken, fish, vegetables, salads. Domenic and Mafalda ate mechanically, knives and forks in perfect contrapuntal rhythm. Gina stopped moving. Anthony and Amir also sat immobile and silent, eyes glassy.

“I'm going for a pee,” Charlie said.

Gina turned to him, expressionless.

The faux candlelight of the great crystal chandelier above the dance floor dimmed, perhaps to signal the end of the meal, but many still hovered over their plates, though none seemed to be eating. Indeed, they all had their eyes closed — Charlie wondered if they'd chosen the lag between dishes to snooze. Someone called out his name, or so he thought, but he feigned

distraction and continued to the men's washroom, tiled in startling black and pink marble. The bathroom's fluorescent lights flickered at an epileptic frequency. A smell of urinal cakes and diarrhea widened Charlie's nostrils. He peed in a stall and when he came out to wash his hands, Vinnie Pupazzo, bookie and loan shark, stood at a urinal in a skinny slate suit shrugging and peeing. White nylon ribbons dangled from his shoulders. Charlie wondered what they were. He cleared his throat.

"Vinnie Pupazzo. What's up?"

Vinnie turned his head. "Squid?" he said as he shook off his penis. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, in the flesh. Don't mind the bandages. Motorcycle accident."

"Motorcycle accident? Ha. Nice try. Tell me everything."

Charlie opened his hands. "What can I tell you? Had a rough few weeks."

"I hear you. We all have our crosses. I'm going in for a polyp operation next week. You don't want to know. You're Josey's cousin, right — I mean Rocco's, may he rest in peace. I'm Josey's cousin on her mother's side. My mom and pop baptized Sofia. Good kid. Know squat about the guy. Looks kind of like a young Mike Peca — nice couple. Just hope he's a straight-shooter and not one of those Sicilian highwaymen."

Charlie wasn't following, Vinnie's words garbled somehow. He looked strange, too, pale, no eyelashes, unblinking. Probably coked up. Charlie started for the door.

"Yo, Squid, a word."

"What is it, Vinnie?" Charlie waited, but the guy just stood there, shifting from foot to foot, eyes vibrating. "Keep me hanging, Vinnie," he said. "I have all night."

"Okay, Squid," he said. "So Ricky Carbone was shooting his mouth off at a poker game

in Rochester. Tells everyone he's going to shoot Pinocchio. He's going to shoot Pinocchio. He scared the kids at the birthday party."

Charlie wasn't sure Vinnie was being straight with him.

"Seriously, Squid. Everyone figures he's talking about one of those performers they get for mannequins's parties these days — instead of a clown, some kids are afraid of them. And maybe this Pinocchio dude exposed himself or whatever to the kids. But you know what Ricky does next? He goes out to his car and comes back with this giant friggin' Pinocchio puppet. See, his says, this cocksucker scared the kids. Then he takes out a heater and blam! Empties a clip into the dummy. Blows its face right off and fills it with holes. Everybody's freaking, he's in such a rage. But then he stands there, waving his piece and says, 'Next up, is a squid, boys. That's right, a squid. Gonna make him leak some ink.' That's what he said."

People are like novelty chattering teeth, Charlie thought. Wind them up and they can't help themselves. Whether it had actually happened was another matter. Ricky lacked a shut-off valve for his mouth. Once he got flowing, no stopping him. Did it make sense that he'd already resolved to finish Charlie? It did. Indicating a loss of faith in him.

"Okay, Vinnie," he said. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"You worried, man?"

"What, me worry? One thing, Vinnie — you went to Mimmo's funeral, right?"

"Why you asking me that now, Squid?"

"I just want to know if you went. Didn't mean anything by it. Just curious."

"Of course I went, Squid. He was my friend."

"Open casket?"

“Aw, geez, Squid. Why you asking me these questions? What’s done is done.”

“One more question. What’s with the those things hanging off you?”

Vinnie looked. “What things? Very funny, Squid.”

As a grumbling Vinnie exited, Charlie saw nothing dangling from his shoulders.

He exited and feeling as though he had placed each foot on a gargoyle skull to steady it, he stood outside the door and surveyed the undulant crowd, unable to single out a single person. Then Father Pirrone appeared with his florid face. “Hello,” he said. “What’re you thinking about right now, Charlie?”

Wincing at the priest’s rancid breath, he said, “I’m thinking about my destiny.”

“You look upon this life as a stage, which is correct. But in the end you’ve treated it like a plaything, which is not.”

Charlie couldn’t take the red-faced priest seriously. He clapped his shoulder.

“Whoa,” Father Pirrone said, raising his hands and feinting fear. “Don’t hurt me! I am with God’s army haha. Oh, but I forgot. God doesn’t scare you, Charlie. What lies beyond this puppet play for Charlie Squillaci is anyone’s guess.”

“And you’ll be reclining on satin couches with Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and all the saints for the rest of time.”

“Make jokes, Charlie, go ahead. Will it be amusing to have your name carved on a tombstone and then have time rub it out? Who will remember you then?”

“Maybe I don’t want to be remembered.”

“Then you’ll probably get your wish. You wanted your destiny: there it is.”

“Tell me something, Father. Why the hell is your face so red?”

The priest scoffed. “See ya later, Charlie. I’ll pray for you.”

Charlie headed back to his table. He thought he heard his name called again but kept walking. Different perfumes, eau de colognes, and hair products — along with an abundance of natural flowers, and the savoury smells of food — combined to form a nauseating assault on his olfactory system. He sniffed his wrist, where he had earlier dabbed some ancient Lagerfeld cologne, and it mollified him. Laughter erupted and he imagined himself the butt of jokes. But when he looked around see who was laughing he only saw people slumped at their tables, disengaged.

At his table, Domenic and Mafalda rested their heads in their folded arms. Charlie wondered if they snoozing between courses or intoxicated. Anthony and Amir sat there silently, smiling but not moving a muscle. Charlie took his seat. Glass in hand Gina stared off into space, her brown eyes almost yellow in the chandelier light. The longer he looked at this person, the less he thought she was his sister.

A ginger server with blush marks that looked rouged on her cheeks stood by the table and announced in a monotone that a dessert table would be unveiled at midnight. She looked at Charlie blankly and walked away.

This scene disquieted him deeply. Everything seemed a bit off. But he had to be stoic. He just didn’t know if he had enough reserves to be stoic anymore. Stoicism had been his guiding light, his code. But it required nerves of steel and inner fortitude, two of his more diminishing qualities. And in the face of demise, stoicism was overrated.

He almost jumped out of his skin when he saw Johnny’s man, Pino, by the entrance doors, in a tight black suit with a raspberry shirt and a skinny black tie, shaved head buffed to a sinister shine. Why was here? Charlie regretted not bringing his push dagger at the very least, to

jam it into Pino's throat if he made a move. But after further reflection, Charlie realized that if he'd come to whack him he'd already be dead. Possibly, he was related to someone on Josey's side, or even to the Sicilian clan that had flown in for the wedding, whose wizened patriarch presently held court at his table, offering two-finger handshakes to massing well wishers.

The deejay, in a vintage blue tuxedo jacket and black tights, announced the wedding song to resounding applause and wolf whistles, and instructed the newlyweds to advance to the middle of the now spotlit dance floor. With the groom helping the bride transport her massive train from the head table, the two stepped forth to more applause and whistles, and the deejay dropped the needle. The song was an Elvis classic. The couple locked up and started rocking from side to side.

*Wise men say, only fools rush in
But I can't help falling in love with you...*

As the wedding song drew to an end, the bridal party and the Sicilian relatives, wide-eyed as they straggled into view, assembled on the dance floor. The patriarch bowed to the bride and, since her own father was deceased, invited her to dance with him. Gaetano joined Josey — in midnight blue velvet and pearls — as his own ailing mother had not made the trip, and the deejay played “White Winter Hymnal” by the Fleet Foxes.

*I was following the, I was following the
I was following the, I was following the
I was following the, I was following the
I was following the, I was following the...*

Treading turbid mental waters, Charlie burst into a cold sweat. He stood up and headed for the exit. He needed fresh air. His legs wobbled as he moved around the tables and servers dispatching dishes, silver and glasses to the kitchen on sketchily balanced trays. Charlie's brain and stomach sloshed and swirled; his right leg buckled, but he recovered before he fell. At one

point he sat down on a stray chair to re-gather himself. He sniffed his wrist, but the fading Lagerfeld didn't help this time. The entire banquet room spun around him. Sweat poured off his temples. He could feel his shirt under his jacket sticking to his skin. He stood up and staggered toward an exit sign, where two young women in mauve and lemon chiffon cackled and and giggled.

“Oh my God, Dez, he's such a dork.”

“He's such a dork.”

“He's cute though.”

“He's like a total dork-bae.”

“Like, totally.”

The girls paid no heed to Charlie as he hip-checked the push bar on the door and let himself out into what was ostensibly a security-lit smoking area that led to the banquet hall's parking lot, with several hunching guests in suits and gowns puffing white-plumed cigarettes and stomping the crunchy snow. Moist from sweat, Charlie's bandages immediately began to freeze and the sweat on his neck coldly evaporated. But it felt good. It felt marvelous. He shut his eyes and filled his lungs with the frigid air.

“Fuck me, it's cold!” blurted one of the male smokers, bent over for some reason.

Charlie opened his eyes. His nausea had abated. When he moved, his shoes slid on the flattened snow. He fell still and reassessed. Where was he? Right there, Earth slowly turning with him firmly on it. He wasn't flying off its surface soon. The sky above teemed with dirty stars and ghostly scudding clouds, the moon half-full, its sallow luminosity depressing. Music boomed from the banquet hall. Charlie's shoulders shivered. He hugged himself and turned to head back inside when he saw Pino standing next to a refuse bin, cellphone in one hand, a

cigarette burning in the other.

“Crashing the wedding?” Charlie said, stepping toward him.

Pino pocketed his cellphone. “Yeah.” He said in that raspy near falsetto. “It’s how I meet the ladies. Guy like me has a field day, know what I’m saying?” He pulled on his cigarette and held the smoke before exhaling a gray-blue plume in Charlie’s direction. “Actually, Gaetano’s my second cousin. Good kid. His ma and mine — God rest their souls — were first cousins. But I don’t talk to his old man. You look terrible. Surprised you had the balls to show up to a wedding like this. Takes courage.”

“I’m getting work done.”

“Do tell,” Pino said, pulling on his cigarette and crinkling his yellowish forehead.

“Total makeover, nose, eyes, everything. You won’t be able to recognize me, no one will. Since I’m going to be scarred anyway, might as well go for an Al Pacino look.”

Pino bared his braces. “You’re full of shit, Squid.”

“Calling me a liar? Ha, by the way, Pino, you won’t believe this. Heard it through the grapevine that Pinocchio — uh-huh, our little friend — sleeps with the fishes.”

“What’re you talking about? Are you drunk? Or are you just losing it, Squid. ”

“Anything decent ever exit that bunghole?”

“Look,” Pino said, “go back inside, old man — find a quiet spot and take a nap or something, must be way past your bedtime.”

The angled security lights cast in sharp relief the strangeness of Pino’s face.

“What the hell happened to your forehead?” Charlie asked. “Is that natural?”

Flicking his cigarette at Charlie with a hail of sparks, Pino said, “My forehead? My forehead? Look at you. And you’re mocking *my* appearance. Wake up and smell the espresso.

You're through, Squid. Ancient history. You're like the Roman Coliseum."

Pino pulled open the door and a flood of warmth and music and the smell of humanity rushed out as he entered. The door banged shut. Charlie felt like he'd run into a wall of ice. He stood there trembling. Then he detected movement at the far end of the parking lot. He fished his glasses out of his pocket, slid them on, and started toward it.

He passed a man in white shirtsleeves and shirt garters on his cellphone, staring at the sky. Tears rolled down his cheeks; steam rose from his head. His lips were blue. There's always a price to pay. Two yellow orbs floated into view. A tingle coursed up Charlie's spine as he walked toward them, shoes shimmying on patches of glassy ice.

The yellow eyes disappeared behind the concrete panels separating the lot from the street. Charlie followed. As he squeezed through two of these panels, his left knee struck an unseen end of rebar and he stumbled forward grunting in agony, at the last moment bracing his fall into a low bank of icy snow. His bare hands plunged into the snow and his chin knifed between them like a spade. He rolled to his back, grabbed his knee, and waited for the pain to subside. It took a few seconds then he groped back to his feet, wiped his hands on his trousers, and rubbed his left knee. No time to be weak now, he thought, and began limping toward a shadowy side street lined with small houses.

Ignoring the throbbing knee pain, Charlie proceeded down the street, toward the escarpment. Remnant Christmas lights burned, but darkness predominated. After a time, he felt no pain. And except for his hands, he didn't feel cold. It seemed the temperature had risen. How late was it? People in this neighborhood retired early. Where was he?

Paramount he not stop walking no matter how much pain he felt. Nevertheless he groaned aloud as he continued, dragging the damaged leg.

Many of the streetlights and houses were dim — vandals, or a power failure. The few people with power were cozily reading by lamplight or more likely watching news online or video gaming, if not zipping up their gimp masks. A dog barked. Charlie hastened his step. But he could move no faster. There, it barked again, disembodied, ethereal. It was no threat. It was no threat. He couldn't feel his hands and feet.

He glanced at his clothes. His suit — it felt like someone else's. His exhalations formed a white train before his face and streamed off toward the black triangle at the end of the street — a blockade? He looked behind him and saw a tall dark figure in a Homburg approaching. Charlie kept moving. He looked again. Still following me, the fucker. For the first time in years he felt truly afraid. How ironic. How rich. You can't escape yourself in the end. Charlie forced his legs to keep moving. Brr. Sweat dotted his forehead. His bandages had loosened. Brr. He needed help. Despite the uninviting darkness, he mounted someone's porch steps and knocked on the screen door. He heard noises inside. Hushed, cautious. Lights flashed on. He had awoken these people. He looked down the street. The figure in the Homburg still advanced.

“He's coming for me!” Charlie cried, banging the screen door. “Please let me in!”

“Go away or we're calling the cops!” a male voice shouted.

Charlie stumbled down the porch steps, crashing to his knees, glasses flying off his face. Rattled and beyond pain now — just an icy whiteness crystalizing inside him — he heard sirens nearing like vexed banshees. He commando-crawled across the snowy lawn, passing a discarded Christmas tree, its scattered needles pricking his palms. The curtains of the woken house fluttered wildly as he crawled away beside vehicles parked along the curb. Fearing alarms, he chose older vehicles to try door handles. Nothing. Finally he came across a pickup truck with a canvas tonneau covering the cargo bed. He lifted the edge of the tonneau. Shovels, bags of salt,

some blue buckets.

The sirens grew louder. Panting and sweating, hands pierced by dry needles, Charlie heaved himself into the cargo bed, knocking a shovel down with a loud clank. When he caught his breath, he pulled the tonneau tight over the cargo bed. If he finds me I'll fight, he thought, eyeing the sharp shovel. He nudged it with his foot, brought it close and pulled the cold wooden shaft against his body, hugging it. Then he rested his back against stacked bags of deicing salt. He used another bag to pillow his head. He needed rest. He gripped the shaft of the shovel more firmly. And he felt white, rendered white as the snow surrounding him, inside and out. It was as if all the blood had drained from him or had crystallized into icy whiteness. He shut his eyes. More than anything, he wanted to sleep now. Sometimes that's all you can want. He let the shovel thud against a bag of salt. Maybe after a few winks he'd feel better.

CHAPTER FIVE

The morning after Sofia and Gaetano's wedding reception — more than a month ago — at Lucarelli's Banquet Hall, a man who lived in an adjacent neighborhood discovered a senior asleep in the cargo bed of his pickup truck and contacted police. Upon arriving and finding Charlie there with his hands all but frozen to a shovel, they called an ambulance and rushed him to Buffalo General suffering from hypothermia, partially frostbitten hands and face, and acute delirium. Indeed, he'd almost frozen to death, and had lost some cognitive function — which Emergency staff cited as the possible basis for his inability to identify his sister, who was called when an orderly found Charlie's cellphone in his pocket. Charlie had also lost the tip of his nose, and portions of the sweat-soaked bandages had frozen into his facial wounds, exacerbating the existing damage and ensuring the resultant scarring would be more disfiguring than first projected. And, after a few days in hospital, Charlie also developed pneumonia with high fever, shakes, and a lung-shredding cough; his stay there extended to ten days before he felt able to leave, though by no means in any shape to care for himself. His sister agreed to move him to her house for the time being, at least until he healed. Later they'd deal with the facial lacerations that had drastically altered his appearance. His bandages had been reduced to silicone dressings for his forehead, cheeks and chin, and triangular gauze nose covering, whatever its medical merits, served as a modest veil. Gina had already talked to Dr. Allegro about finding Charlie a plastic surgeon for his nose, which looked as though an angry rat had tried to chew it off.

“Do you work?” Charlie asked his sister. They sat in her kitchen, drinking coffee from red ceramic mugs, his face swathed like a mummy's.

“What do you mean, do I work?” Gina said.

“You don’t go to work. Like to a job.”

“Charlie, you know I’m on disability.”

He shook his head. He had no idea what she was talking about; she sounded so false he felt like laughing in her face. His real sister, as he recalled, worked as an insurance adjuster. A covered blue bowl on the windowsill caught his eye.

“My car got rear-ended by a transport truck, remember? Squashed like a beer can. I shoulda died. I didn’t die, but it screwed up my back and I’m suffering from PTSD. You don’t remember? You came to the hospital. You brought me those crazy parrot tulips. I’d never seen anything — what are you staring at?”

“Nothing. Secrets. Codes. Are you going back to work?”

“Charlie, I know how much you’ve helped me, too. Don’t think I’m not grateful for that. Your envelopes have never been skinny. I woulda probably lost the house if you weren’t there for me. And you’ve been so good to Anthony since his scumbag father split.”

A silence ensued. Charlie chewed mechanically. But Gina flattened her hands on the table and leaned forward.

“I have to keep an eye on you for a while,” she said, “till you get back on your feet. But you’re going to be okay, Charlie. Your little sister’s right here.”

He smiled. She wasn’t his sister. Maybe someone had paid her to care for him.

“What’s so funny?” Gina said.

“You don’t fool me for a second.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “Yeah, whatever, Charlie, finish your sandwich.”

It tasted of nothing. Along with antibiotics, they’d given him meds that dulled his taste

buds. He had to read the pill bottle again for the name and look up the side effects. The pills were for his nerves, to help relax him when he grew tense or too weird.

He stood up and limped to the living room. Something moved. After checking behind the curtains, he stood by the coffee table for a time with his chest heaving. He felt the presence of someone. Maybe he was wrong. He returned to the kitchen.

“Charlie, what’s going on?” Gina asked. Before he could answer, her cellphone rang. “Hello,” she said and listened, glancing at her brother. “He’s not up for any visits, Ricky. Not right now.” She continued listening with a frown. “No, Ricky. And thank you for the flowers, very kind. I know you and the boys are busy and couldn’t visit Charlie in the hospital — he was only there for two weeks — but thank you for the flowers, real pretty red roses. Thing is, Charlie’s allergic to roses, so I took them home and they really brightened up the house for about three days before I trashed them, so thank you, Ricky.”

Gina rang off and threw the cellphone down on the table.

“Ricky?” Charlie said. His eyes were closing.

“Go take a nap, hon. I’m heading out to run a few errands. I’ll get your apple juice. And we need toilet paper, down to two rolls, and batteries for the fire alarms. I let ’em run down, but if you’re going to be here. Just in case, you know. I sound like a bad mom — but boil some water and woo-woo-woo. They were driving me up the wall. Think you’ll be okay, Charlie?”

“I guess so.”

“Okay. Go lie down. The window is open a crack the way you like. If you’re hungry, there’s that blueberry pie from yesterday — on the breadbox — and vanilla ice cream in the freezer. Just leave a piece for Anthony, okay? Later.”

Charlie retreated to the spare bedroom and stretched out on the boat-shaped bed. Must’ve

been Anthony's once. Charlie pulled the plaid wool throw she kept on the foot of the bed over his legs. He eased his sore back into an agreeable position and slid his hands under his head, which felt as heavy as an anvil. He didn't mind the room; he'd been sleeping well in it, with pharmaceutical assistance. White muslin curtains, curved at the bottom, hung down from a white rod over the window; and a painting Gina had bought at a flea market in Tonawanda hung on the wall opposite the bed: a dark-haired girl with creamy white skin against crimson curtains, her bare arms folded together and hiding her face in a gesture of modesty. He liked to stare at it until the meds kicked in and his eyes thickened, after which he usually fell into a dreamless, not always restful sleep.

He tried to imagine what the girl's face actually looked like, and not the intimation of it offered, but kept dredging up women from his past and the exercise proved depressing. In the dark he could only make out the girl's luminous white skin — that is, the dabs and smears of white paint that ably represented her exposed skin. But in the daylight, even faceless — and perhaps because of that absence of expression or statement — she dominated the room. Indeed, too much so.

He buried his face in the down-filled pillow. It smelled nice here. He glanced left of the bed and regarded the large pink shells on the lacquered black nightstand. Likely from one of Gina's vacations. Would he hear the ocean if he held one to his ear? He reached for the larger of the two shells, but it was so dusty he let it be.

On the nightstand right of the bed, Charlie saw the framed photograph of Gina, his mother, and himself in bright summer wear on a white sand beach with palm trees, likely Florida, and laughing to the camera as though they'd just shared a joke. He had no recollection of that moment, but liked the picture. Sounds issued in the living room. But the heaviness of his

eyes and the warmth of the bed prevailed and soon he was asleep.

He dreamt of Mardi Gras and an ambulant Krewe du Vieux troupe pursuing him with flaming torches, only to be saved from them when high-pitched voices awoke him.

“Quickly, someone take the tray”

“I couldn’t, I’d spill it on that bed.”

Charlie sat up and saw that he was alone in the room. Wan afternoon light filtered in through the curtains. Everything looked vague, insubstantial. He rubbed his eyes and tried to clear the fog from his head. This wasn’t the hospital. This wasn’t home. Then the painting on the wall reminded him that he was at Gina’s house. Who the hell were those people he’d just heard? They sounded older than children. And they spoke with accents. He stood up. A clinking of glasses and teaspoons registered from the kitchen. And who was that? He stepped out of the bedroom, walked to the kitchen, and found no one there. He inspected the sink and saw nothing indicating recent activity. Of course, it was conceivable the imposter had manipulated the environment to suit her purposes. Maybe the mannequins were part of a larger plan she’d hatch at the perfect moment. But why had she ministered to him? That may well have been a temporary measure to appease the authorities and quiet his bosses, all of whom were out for his blood. But no, his real sister would have never let these mannequins take over her house.

Charlie’s head hurt; he was thirsty.

He opened the refrigerator door and the only beverage in it was a carton of loganberry juice. When he felt better he’d go out and buy what he liked. He’d also have to find new, less excruciating expressions now that his face had been rearranged. Looking in the mirror pained him. He felt no connection to the monster staring back.

He loaded up Gina’s moka, set it on the stove and fired up the gas burner, which flamed

up high and blue and startled him.

He walked over to the blue bowl he'd spotted earlier on the windowsill. He moved the piece of cardboard laid over it, then dipped his fingers in the bowl: soft and moist. He sniffed his fingers. Roses. He smelled roses. He dipped his fingers again, pinched off a few petals and lifted them to his face: like wet red velvet, blackening at the edges. The scent was quite strong. He flicked the petals back into the bowl and watched as they dissolved in the water, turning it blood red. He quickly covered it.

He recalled an expression from his catechism classes as a youth: Become like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven. He hadn't understood what it meant, even after the priest expounded at length. What could it mean to a child? But perhaps this represented an opportunity for Charlie to unpack and respect a concept that had once eluded him or that had held no significance for his younger self.

He entered the living room and to his great consternation saw mannequins seated on the tuxedo sofa and a few cross-legged on the carpet, all with their hands on their knees but one — pressed together as if in prayer, though no sound emerged from the half-smiling mouth. They shared the same face, like siblings or cousins— but also like Willy Verginer's sculptures — and wore similar muted colors that made distinguishing one from the other impossible, even between genders, ostensibly separated by length of hair.

The mannequins stared at him blankly, none moving or making any sign. He stood there debating what to do next when he smelled burning and wondered if Gina had left a candle lit. She loved scented candles. Inexplicably, he nodded to the mannequins and went to check her bedroom. With its midnight blue curtains, mahogany furniture, and pachyderm-themed prints and accents — the tusked bull elephant carved from ivory on her nightstand the saddest of these

— he found her bedroom oppressive. A neon green floral air freshener plugged into the wall by the door exuded an odour of grasshoppers. A crucifix over her bed with a ghoulish Jesus gazing on only punctuated the malaise.

Nothing was burning in there; Charlie returned to the hallway.

He thought he'd check the basement. He walked up to the basement door at the end of the hallway, gripped the knob and froze. He thought he heard voices. “

“Who the fuck is there?” he said, hitting the light switch.

The voices continued, softly.

Charlie considered running to the kitchen for a knife; but if these people were there for the mannequins — a knife would alarm them. Gina had left him to deal with this friggin mess without saying anything about it. Why would she do that? Why? He despised himself for letting this wooden impostor convince him to come and stay at the house. He should have known better. He should have trusted his gut feeling. He had only ever failed by turning against it.

He took a step down and cocked his ear. Only the ticking of the furnace registered. Hearing nothing else, he grasped the handrail, descended to the bottom of the staircase, and surveyed the junk-heaped, cinder-block confines of the basement, his nostrils widening at the musty smell.

A red wooden rocking horse caught his eye — it had gone unnoticed his only other time in the basement — the red paint peeling off the carved saddle and the rockers.

A memory of young Anthony riding it in a straw cowboy hat and a western shirt flashed before him. No time to wax nostalgic: footsteps thumped above him. He hurried to the staircase, gripped the handrail, and mounted the stairs. Upon reaching the landing, he stopped to catch his breath, hands on knees. A warm waft of char made him flinch. To his astonishment, several

mannequins raced across the hallway. Charlie watched with wonder as they soundlessly dashed back and forth. Tendrils of smoke crept over the floor. Had they started a fire? Were they trying to burn the house down? Charlie slapped his hands to his head. Panic set in as the smoke thickened. He grabbed his cellphone and called his sister, who answered after six interminable rings.

“What is it, Charlie? I’m on the road.”

“The mannequins. I think they started a fire.”

“What mannequins, Charlie! What’re you talking about?”

“They were here already. They — they started a fire.”

“Charlie, listen, get out of the house right now and call 911. Do it now, Charlie. I’m twenty minutes away. Are you listening?”

Smoke billowed into the hallway. It reeked of charred coffee beans. Screening his face with his arm and holding the cellphone to his ear, he scooted down the hallway, clinging to the wall.

“In the kitchen,” he said. “It’s in the — ”

“Did you leave something on the stove, Charlie?”

Stove? And then it hit him like a punch — he’d left the moka on the burner!

He tried to enter the kitchen, but the smoke billowing black and thick from the stove rebuffed him. The panicked mannequins continued running back and forth. Flames erupted beside the stove and the surrounding cupboards; in no time they spread from the kitchen to the living room, igniting the tuxedo sofa into a roaring orange fireball.

Screams rose from the basement. What now? Charlie couldn’t slow his whirling thoughts

enough to think logically. He considered bolting for the front door, but how would he have lived with himself if those people in the basement perished?

“Get out!” he cried, shooing the mannequins to the front door, but they dashed back and forth then abruptly turned down the hallway and clattered to the basement door.

“No!” he cried, coughing and choking. “Not down there!”

Flames surged between the kitchen and living room. Flames dripped from the ceiling. How was he going to escape, let alone save those folks and the mannequins? Bust them out of the basement windows? Maybe that’s what the mannequins were doing. He could help. Then he could escape, too. They’d burn with the house if they didn’t get out.

As swirling black smoke filled the house and lush flames roared and spread, Charlie bent over coughing. Screaming from the basement intensified.

“Hail Mary, full of grace,” he whispered, “the Lord is with thee.” He pulled up his T-shirt, covered his mouth and nose and steeled himself to go down. They’d all burn if he didn’t help them. They’d burn and nothing would be left of them. Now he was coughing with such violence he thought he cracked a rib. He stood at the top of the stairs coughing and spitting as flames engulfed the house behind him.

He took one step down. The mannequins huddled at the bottom of the stairs. “Hail Mary, full of grace,” he whispered, and descended.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The Mannequins is a short story that metastasized into a novel and then was at last compressed into a novella. I had tried to get some traction with the novel, a story about an aging hitman with dementia, but readers/editors didn’t know what to make of its satirical elements, and perhaps the book was longwinded, or poorly written, or boring, or mining a dead vein, or a waste of fucking time. Despite this, I managed to get representation by a big name Canadian agent who effused that she “loved this book.” So when the novel didn’t happen (the heralded agent dropped me unceremoniously after a year of finding no corroborating love), I thought I’d rework the book to see how I could improve it. Always a danger, returning to old*

work. I began to slash and cut and expunge and expurgate and compress and buff until the 80k word novel was savaged into its 20k current novella incarnation, that the beautiful people at FOTD have agreed to publish. And I must say, I much prefer this compressed version to the former. I love the novella form (think Heart of Darkness, Turn of the Screw, The Metamorphosis, Miss Lonelyhearts, etc). I was also able to realize my fascination with surrealism and mannequins in general and dementia specifically in a focussed and bizarre/lyrical manner that pleases me.

AUTHOR BIO: Salvatore Difalco is a widely published Canadian author with an impressive CV and an ear for good writing so finely tuned it stings. He recently came on board as Honourary Editor. Sal moves around but sometimes calls The Big Bad (Toronto) his turf, sometimes Hamilton. He is fluent in Italian and Sicilian.