THE MEDALLION: A NOVEL

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The Medallion/Chapter One: You Talkin' to Me?

In sea water, sound travels at 343 meters per second. Sasha remembered this from his physics class at the gymnasium, high school, in the Ukraine, in Ostrog. He immigrated to the USA from there, really fled, with every ruble and grivnia he had, five years ago. Whatever made the sound, he knew, might be a mile away or next to him, serrated teeth and a mouth open like an excavator bucket.

"Wake up, Sasha. Sasha, wake up," said Wally, tapping on the cab window with his cab keys.

In the 19th hour of a 24 hour shift, Sasha was asleep, slouched in the passenger seat of his cab, his jacket on the meter and his Red Sox cap over his eyes. He was in a trench in the Pacific; ten thousand feet of water drove him down into the darkness where the fish carried their own lights. He breathed shallow from the squeeze on his ribs and lungs. A couple more meters, he would be crushed. Wally knocked again.

"Sasha, wake up."

It was Wally Too-Too, Sasha recognized, as he came to the surface; Wally drove for Mystic River Cab, known for the logo on the doors, a light-blue river delivering a yellow-striped cab. His real name was Walter Kibaki. When he started three years ago, from the slums of Nairobi to Chelsea where an uncle sponsored him, Walter said, "Get me drink too, too," to whoever went for coffee. "I give you money." The name stuck.

"Wally," said Sasha, adjusting his makeshift pillow, ready to plunge again. "Let me be. I'm on a double shift." Sasha's English sounded American, except his *h's*, *w's* and his *p's* were borrowed from the 37 consonants of the Russian language. A language specialist might also catch the echo of Ukrainian in Sasha's pronunciation. Some men carry geography in their mouths.

Twelve hour shifts were common for cabs around South Station. That included gassing up, eating, and bathroom breaks, along with fixing a tire pricked by a nail from dump truck spills. It also could mean as

many as 50 customers, giving receipts, making change, separating tips from meter money, listening politely to droning customers, and maybe 300 miles on a shift. More if you had a long fare. They drove on smooth highways and pitted streets, in summer heat and snow storms, maybe stopping at an all night car wash to clean vomit from the back seat. The double shift was dangerous because you could fall asleep with your hands on the wheel at positions 9 and 3 and wake up with the engine sitting on your lap, airbag or no. The money was good from the double shift, sometimes great, the tips better than the fares.

Sasha drove for Mt. Tabor Taxi, Menachim Oz's company of three cabs, one a spare, running around the clock. Sasha was driving the number one cab: Menachim's own white-with-black lettered Chevy Impala. The logo of the Israeli mountain reached toward heaven on both passenger doors; inside was plush carpeting and buttery leather, and a 200-watt sound system with soft jazz or high brow classical, depending on the customer.

The Plexiglas partition was called bullet-resistant, Menachim said, by a manufacturer who thought bullet-proof promised too much. Menachim and Sasha kept the partition door open and accepted the risk. Tips went down when it was closed, they noted, with customer and driver shouting through the glass, and implied an insult to the customer. Instead, Sasha had learned to size up a fare, like cops who scan a crowd until an internal alarm for trouble goes off. Sasha observed the way people behaved with eye contact, how they looked before they got in the cab. Especially at night, he passed on passengers whose eyes darted with evasiveness, or blinked fast like they were clearing a cinder. Day or night, he never picked up three young men together if even one of them had a neck tattoo. In rougher neighborhoods at night, Sasha dropped some of his fares in well lit shopping centers.

Presentation means a lot in the service industry, he learned at night school. It occurred to him that business courses backed up the obvious with large amounts of data. Sasha kept the cab clean. After every third customer, Sasha vacuumed the inch-high carpeting and wiped the beige leather with a damp scented cloth. He washed the car every day, more in winter, when salt and dirt stuck to fenders like cake. Menachim didn't allow smoking in his cabs, and posted No Smoking signs. The ashtrays had wrapped mints. Menachim installed a cell phone on the dash, with one large button for 911. Extra security was a ball point hammer with a rubber grip under the driver's seat.

"12:15 from New York be in half hour," said Wally when Sasha opened the window. "Come to Raoul's cab, Sash. We're watching the movie."

The movie. Of course, Sasha thought. He stepped out of the Chevy and stretched. Nothing could unkink his muscles and tendons, except maybe an ironing board. He walked down the line of cabs waiting for the

12:15, exhaust pluming upward in the cool air. Raoul's cab was a 7-passenger van, their movie house. Raoul Benetez had been driving the longest of any of them, with two kids in the Boston school system, and owned a triple decker in Dorchester. He came from Guatemala when he was a kid. He had been a carpenter's helper and tried his own business of sanding and waxing wooden floors, but he ended up driving a cab. Tran Minh was sometimes called Doc. He was studying to be an EMT in Boston. While he drove, he listened on his MP3 player to medical texts and cases. He said he knew the material, just the language was hard. He was always good for advice when you were sick. For guys without medical insurance, he did fine.

Sasha walked up to the van. The windows were steamed white, but he could make out the faces of three men lit by a laptop screen. Sasha slid open the door and squeezed in beside Wally Too-Too and Raoul. *Taxi Driver* was on. A few scratches on the DVD caused small jumps in the action. The scene fragmented for a moment, shed pixels that reappeared by magic as from another dimension. Sometimes the Technicolor, the reds especially, looked painted on the film. The nervous dialog continued, as if the actors kept touching unshielded electrical wires.

Sasha saw that it was an opening scene introducing Travis Bickle, the taxi driver who does crazy, heroic things to save a girl from a pimp's abuse. Sasha thought Raoul and the guys had gotten further into the movie, but apparently they waited for him, an honor of sorts. Travis Bickle's yellow Checker cab was rolling through space, licked by steam from pipes on the slick New York streets. The jazz music emphasized the drama.

"I thought you were in the middle of the movie," said Sasha. "You know. Up to Travis's line, 'You talkin' to me?'"

"We're waiting for you, professor. To give us the lowdown on what we see. To me, it's just weird, *misterioso*, but I like it," said Raoul.

"Why do you like it, Raoul?" Sasha asked.

"'Because, I like it. Not sure why."

"It stays with you long after you see it, my man," said Tran. "A few days later, I see scenes in my head."

"'Haunting', they call it. Watch," said Sasha, pointing toward the laptop screen. "Scorsese the director is making a mythic start. Movies try to put a lot of meaning into a scene. Mythic is just a fancy kind of beginning."

One of Sasha's few electives in his college curriculum was a history of film. His class watched movies while the teacher lectured. The students took notes by penlight. Sasha wrote a paper about the chase scenes in some of Alfred Hitchcock's films. Menachim's wife Elizabeth helped him type it up. The teacher corrected his grammar more than his ideas.

"Mystic like the cab? Like the river?" asked Raoul.

"No," said Sasha. "Mythic. M-Y-T-H-I-C. Means exaggerated, for a purpose. Towers over things. An idea more than a thing."

Sasha pointed through the clouded van window to the aluminum-clad building near them, 32 stories of it.

"Check out the Federal building across the street. Inside are a thousand employees doing its business," said Sasha. "But what does the building make you think of?"

"It's solid. You can see it all over the city. And the silver reminds me of money," Raoul said.

"Well, it may also want to represent the banking system of the US. You can see it for miles, like you say, solid and silver. I always think about money too. Well, Travis's cab not just a cab – of course, it *is* a cab like any of ours – delivering people to places. But it also brings ideas of fate and justice into the movie, however crazy and violent it comes out."

"Ah," said Tran,"Harvard boy explains."

"Harvard *Extension*, not College; it's night school, Tran."

"I still not get it," said Wally.

"Too-too," Sasha said, "it's like the Liberty statue at New York, you know the one. She's not a statue of a real person like you see at a public building or a museum; she represents the idea of the country, freedom, opportunity. The cab in the movie represents justice that Travis Bickle is bringing to men who abuse children."

Wally still looked lost. Sasha was about to try to explain again when Wally, Raoul and Tran laughed. They were teasing him, he saw, once again. He laughed too, at himself for taking the subject so seriously. His friends were older than he, but not by much. They were taller; even Vietnamese Tran was 5-10. Sasha was nearly 5-8 in his spit-shined Rockports, 5-6 in his socks. He was slimmer than they. He was in better shape than all of them, though. He had free weights and a pull-up bar in his basement apartment in Cambridge. He ran around his neighborhood block in any weather, in winter with shorts, a T-shirt, hat and gloves. He liked the cold. His skin glided over the muscles and tendons, not enough body fat to obscure the mechanics beneath.

Wally's cell phone alarm went off. “Nearly 12:15; we better be ready.”

“You talkin' to me?” Sasha said, and they all laughed again, as he knew they would, at the lame joke. *Taxi Driver* was not all that they watched. They enjoyed a TV show of the 1980s, *Taxi,* with Danny DeVito and Judd Hirsch. The drivers laughed loudest at Louie, DeVito's character, shaped like a fireplug, the manager of operations, because they all had worked for someone like him.

Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver,* however, was the favorite. He fit their mood, so often boredom or fatigue, when the grind of the job cut through reserves of patience and struck bone. The repetition of bringing people from here to there and there to here, observers in the flow of other people's lives, the stream of ruby brake lights in traffic jams, and the exhaust smells in their hair, their butts sore from sitting, their legs stiff from braking – these wore on them faster than they could replace thin reserves of endurance. With the movie, it was nice to imagine that their jobs had the potential for heroism. The horrific violence at its end purged their annoyances and monotony.

The drivers weren't interested in being heroes themselves; the chance for violence was in their work. Robbery was a threat that they lived with like black ice on winter roads, or a drunk driver doing 90 the wrong way on the Pike. The bullet-resistant glass and partition between the customer and them underscored that. Despite regulations to bring all fares to their destinations, in sections of Boston they dropped young men at shopping centers or Dunkin' Donuts, well-lit and busy with cars and people.

Still, sometimes the partition between driver and passenger did not work; they left it open by accident or were tired of shouting through the Plexiglas, and they got robbed. Both Wally and Tran had been held up with a knife and had lost a wad of cash to save being cut; Raoul had a gun pushed into his neck by a young hood. The police caught him, but not before he had spent all the cash. Sasha didn't get robbed yet, but he did jump into the back seat one night to keep an estranged husband from beating his wife,

until the BPD cruisers showed up. Sasha surprised his friends by subduing the man, an angry six-footer, with one short punch to the side of his throat.

The cabbies didn't watch many war movies. Davey Sikes, who drove for Brattle Cab, told them what it was like in the first Gulf war in Kuwait on an Air Force medical evacuation team; they flew to Germany with the severely wounded, those with lost limbs, battered brains, and charred skin. Sasha did not talk much about his time in the Russian Federation army, in Chechnya, but he nodded when Davey spoke.

Wally Too-Too and Tran also knew violence as youngsters, when they did nothing except be at one place or another. Wally said that the Nairobi slum was like a war zone, with the machete or long knives, the weapons for survival. He had a scar across his shoulder from a swipe that separated him from his mother's HIV medicine when he was a boy. Tran's parents were boat people escaping the fall of Saigon in 1975; 100 people on a trawler build for 30, bobbing around in the South China Sea until a Thai patrol boat picked them up, Tran just a baby at the time. Then years waiting for a relative to sponsor them to get into the States.

“Sasha, check it out, my man: you now first in line,” said Raoul, tapping Sasha on the shoulder.

Two cabs before his had left with fares or for supper break. Sasha jogged to his Chevy and moved up the line before the other drivers started honking. From the station platform, he could hear the bells and the loud speaker announcing the 12:15 from New York, five minutes late. Passengers spilled out of South Station, lugging carry-on bags and backpacks or pulling bags on wheels. It was too late on a Sunday night for Red Cap porters. A young couple, dressed nice, crossed the sidewalk to his cab and opened the back door. They needed to get to the north shore, Newburyport.

“Going to cost you, sir,” warned Sasha, partly to see if the couple was good for the fare.

“No problem,” said the young man, his wide face flushed with triumph and booze. “Interview this morning in New York. My wife went shopping and made a day of it. I have a voucher for expenses. So whatever it takes.”

“Did you get the job, sir?” Sasha asked.

“Did I? Yes, sir, I did. We're gonna be New Yorkers. And we had a bunch of drinks on Amtrak to celebrate – watch the bumps, pal, please.”

With the bags in the trunk, Sasha started the meter and headed for 93 north. Traffic, once he got past the cluster around South Station, was light. He punched the Chevy up to 60 and set the cruise at 65. In the rear view mirror, he checked if his customers had their belts on. They didn't. Sasha redid his own belt with a click. The couple did not get the hint. The seat partition between the passenger and driver was padded, but the case-hardened steel beneath was thick enough to stop a .38. In a fender-bender, their faces and legs of the passengers would take a beating. Their choice, Sasha thought. He kept the ride smooth and the couple dozed against each other, their mouths ajar and faces at peace.

They awoke with the cab in Newburyport, in good time, a nice townhouse with window boxes on a cobble-stone street, not far from the center of the sleepy town. As with the channel near South Station, Sasha could smell the briny Atlantic, except cleaner. He pocketed a good tip from the yuppies, put the cab in Park and helped them bring the shopping bags and valise up the front steps. He handed his embossed business card and cell phone number.

“If you folks need to get to the airport or South Station, call us at Mt. Tabor Cabs. We give you a good flat rate,” said Sasha.

The business cards were his idea, something he picked up from a business course at Harvard Extension. In a tight competitive market, like the taxi industry, service and advertising make the difference. Word of mouth is the best advertising, and it's free. When Sasha owned his own business, when he had his medallion from the City of Boston, he'd make his a cross between a livery service and a cab company. In that way, in slow times, he could line up with the other cabbies at South Station, North Station or Logan Airport, and still hire himself out for special events and contracts to businesses.

Each week, in the basement of Cambridge Trust, he opened his safety deposit box in a cubicle as quiet as a grave and put in his tips and extra cash. Menachim gave a small part of his salary under the table, a strange but useful American expression, for what was taken for granted in Russia. Sasha also had declared only a small amount of his tips. How else, he thought, could he build up the capital to buy anything? Taxes and fees killed him. At the library on the public computers, he checked web sites and eBay for medallions, a rare event at a good price. In New York, medallions could go for half a mill or more.

A few weeks ago, the Somali Hussein, with the garage in the section of Dorchester nicknamed Mogadishu, stopped by South Station and walked the line of cabs. He had a medallion for sale, cheap, or at least cheaper, for cash. Cash hid the transaction from the tax man, at least some of it. Sasha was interested, more than interested. Since then, he’d been waking up thinking of the Somali medallion, as he

now called it. Menachim didn't trust the Somalis or the neighborhood, and warned Sasha. But the price was good, too good to pass up.

Once Sasha had the medallion, he had plans. A market was where buyers and sellers mingled or clashed, so basic to living everywhere, even in Russia. He'd go after the high end. His taxi would be more upscale than Menachim's Chevy Impala, maybe a diesel Mercedes or BMW, to save fuel costs. Or a Lexus hybrid. No ordinary Crown Vic or loud yellow paint job either. Cool colors like in a hospital waiting room. Bilstein shocks and struts. A filter to clean the air. Customer would shut the door of his cab and be surrounded by comfort, with the potholes, noises and smells of the streets feeling a million miles away.

Sasha needed a special name, called branding. He hadn't come up with it yet. Ostrog, the town where he was born in the Ukraine, would not mean anything here, like the "Odessa" cabs he had seen in New York. Maybe he should try "Speznaz," from when he was a reluctant volunteer in the Russian Federation army, the Special Forces branch. Speznaz yanked him out of the motor pool to go on vacation with them, *opachik*, in Chechnya, their humor twisted like a garrote. Sasha ran his tongue against the porcelain and metal where his front teeth had been. It could have been his eyes, his arm, his prick; the place exacted a price, peace of mind for sure, even if it left you with your life.

On 128 south back to Boston, Sasha inched the taxi to 70, set the cruise, and opened his driver's side window. He stuck his head into the early morning air. The cold friction scratched his skin and did the trick: he was chilled and alert. Just to make sure, he stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts for a large black, no sugar, and a whole wheat bagel, plain. They should have given him the bagel, given how stale it was, he thought. He had three more fares and not enough time for a short nap. From the airport, he drove to Newton, the traffic thinning more in the early morning. His cell phone rang with another fare close by in Watertown and from there back to Logan; he drove twice to the north shore, flight attendants from the airport back to Winthrop and Revere. His last fare was from North Station to Weston and with dawn flickering in the west, he turned off his roof light and headed to Menachim's in Cambridge.

The Israeli was waiting on the steps of his house, his coat buttoned up against the morning chill, and two cups of coffee on the porch banister. He had the big arms and chest of a weight lifter at one point in his life and every jacket looked short and small.

"Gassed up and clean," said Sasha. "She burns a quart now every 1000 miles, every week or so, I noitce. Rings must be worn. The receipts from the shifts and gas are in the glove box. I'm a few bucks over my count. Must have given the wrong change."

“Keep it,”said Menachim. “For your own cab.”

Sasha took the coffee from the porch rail and took a sip. It was a courtesy. He had too much coffee already.

“It’s a leak, Sash,” said Menachim. “From a seal. I found it last week in the driveway, in the light snow we had. Our cabs don't sit long enough to see stains. You know, cars are like people – lose too much fluid, and they just stop running. They bleed out. The Chevy's due for the shop.”

“In the army, all our vehicles leaked or burned oil,” said Sasha. “Quality control in Russia means plenty of control, just no quality. I got the habit of checking fluids every time I drove. A conscript didn't. A personnel carrier, a BMP, got 10 kilometers from camp and stopped. They didn't believe the oil pressure gauge dropped to zero until the engine quit. They called for help.”

“Did you get it back?”

“We went to tow it with a tank retriever. They are big and slow. By the time we got there, Chechens set the BMP on fire with gas bombs and cooked everyone, except two they shot trying to escape.”

The conversation stopped. Menachim said, “That's the first time you ever mentioned this to me.”

“I dreamed it lately. The whole thing. And that ride back to the base where the bandits chased me and nearly got me. Some things you don't forget.”

“I was infantry,” said Menachim. “Service in Israel is three years, plus a month a year reserves. I've been in two wars. Small ones. We walked everywhere. Those tanks are just metal cans, like tuna fish. Do you want breakfast, war hero? Elizabeth made a good Sabra breakfast: salad with oil, tomatoes, onions, cukes, eggs, fish. Fresh bread. You have to smell the bread. She baked it last night.”

“Thanks, but no appetite. Too tired. Just drop me off on Mass Ave. I'll walk from there.”

“*Bullsheet*,” said Menachim in transliterated Hebrew for a universal word. “You get door-to-door service. No tipping.”

Menachim first followed protocol: he did a 360 around the Chevy and checked the lights and the signals. He popped the hood and pressed the belts and hoses with his thumb. Sasha already checked the oil.

Menachim got in and adjusted the seat for his height. They drove slowly to Sasha's basement apartment, the click-click of the valves in synthetic oil barely disturbing the dawn quiet. The streets were gray. Sparrows were chirping in the trees, cleaning beaks on the twigs. Trailer trucks were parked, making deliveries to groceries and coffee shops. The city was waking up just when Sasha was going home. A strange life. Claire, his landlady, left the light on by his entrance.

Sasha turned to Menachim. "Don't yell, Menachim. I have date with Ani tonight," he said."Late supper. After that, I'll drive number 2 cab until I pick you up."

Menachim shook his head, but said nothing. Sasha thought he had escaped his friend's predictable comments.

"Again?" Menachim asked.

Here it comes, Sasha thought.

"What are you, a *tipesh?* A fool? She don't stand you up enough?"

"She's busy," said Sasha. "She's very busy. You know, she's saving to get out. This is it, the year."

"There is no out. She's an escort, Sash. Fancier than some, gorgeous for sure, but makes her living –."

"Please, *mahspeke*," Sasha interrupted with the little Hebrew he learned."Enough. Just layoff, Menachim."

"Elizabeth knows a nice school teacher from Somerville. She thinks cab drivers are sexy. Can you beat that? She's pretty too. And what about your nice landlady? She's pretty and has a great kid. A readymade family."

"Ani and I were married," said Sasha. "Don't you remember? She's the reason I got here."

"You aren't married now, and she did it for a price."

"Everyone has a price. Everyone has to eat. Ani's had a hard life. You can't judge her so." Sasha got out of the cab. He felt like it, but he didn't slam the door. Menachim was his closest friend. What Sasha meant to say is: I know everything about her. It bothers me plenty, but I still see us together. Some things, feelings, you don't choose. They just are, he thought. Menachim had his window down, his grin in place.

“Have a good day, you *putz*,” said Sasha.

“Think about Elizabeth's friend,” laughed Menachim. “Did I tell you, she teaches sex education?”

Sasha went down the four stairs, unlocked the dead bolt and was inside. It was always damp in the basement, in effect five feet down in the dirt, which pushed against the foundation with small cracks. In winter the moisture helped the place feel warmer. He brushed by the sport coat and shirt hanging over one of the exposed pipes.

These were for his date with Ani. He'd pick up No. 2 taxi from Menachim's at 6 that evening, do fares until midnight and then drive out to Saugus to pick her up. They'd eat on Route 1 or on the Revere Beach Boulevard, the all night restaurants along the beach for the crowds leaving the clubs; they'd eat while listening to the waves drumming on the shore. Now he realized he was hungry. He probably should have taken Menachim’s offer of breakfast.

Sasha poured a glass of whole milk and licked the rich butterfat from his upper lip, his tongue on the scar, the relic from Chechnya. Maybe they'd go back to Ani's place, he thought, depending on her mood or her work. He couldn't stay the night. For a moment, he smelled her skin, his nose against the softest part, behind her ear and down the smooth slope of her neck. He liked when she pulled him into her arms and breathed, “Ya tebya lyublyu.” She loved him, she said, at least when they were breath-to-breath. It's been a while since they shared a bed. Each time, they fit each other in a way that awoke his wonder. He put his partial denture in a glass of warm water and brushed his teeth. Sasha sat down on the bed to untie his shoes. He reached for a shoelace, but didn’t make it. He was asleep.

The Medallion/Chapter Two: I Going to Disney World!

Octavio was his cousin or his brother. Julio was never sure. His mother brushed the question off like dandruff from her shoulder. They didn't look alike, but you could never tell. Brothers sometime looked like strangers. He heard that there were tests to figure it out; something to do with the blood or bones, little smudges from which the doctors could tell who belonged to whom. He didn't care enough to find out. Octavio was his brother.

Octavio came into his life because Julio's parents argued a lot. They shouted until he put his little palms over his ears. She was a beauty, his mother Beatrice, the Bonita Senora, as they called her in their neighborhood of their small Colombian town on the Brazilian border. His father was a teacher, ten years older. Julio remembered his father wore a tie with a starched shirt even in summer. His mother was the third daughter of six children; her mother Gracia, a widow, washed his father's shirts.

His father, they said, had enough money to buy a small white house for his future mother-in-law, while he courted her eldest daughter. He was wild, crazy in love, with his mother Beatrice. Julio heard that his parents married because he, Julio, would be born before they were married, because he was an accident. For him, it was a word of fender benders and collisions, debris in the road, and tow trucks with twirling lights. How could a person ever be an accident, he wondered.

One night his father and mother had the worst argument ever. He could hear them take large lung fulls of air and exhale curses. She called him something and laughed. In warm weather all the windows were open. The whole neighborhood heard. His father walked outside and then came back to slap her. Julio heard the whack in the other room where he tried to sleep. His mother flung his door open and came into his room. Her cheeks were shiny with tears, and her face hot when she hugged him. She told Julio that she was going to Bogota. She had an aunt living in the hills around the city. She would come back to get him in a few months. She had a valise already packed under his bed. She left.

She did not come back right away. She called. She sent him a gift that came late for his birthday and once a letter full of X's for kisses. Over a year later, she did return, thinner, with just the clothes she left with, and none of the makeup she used, even to go shopping in their little town. Julio was surprised that his father accepted her back and asked forgiveness. Later she told them both she had a surprise. Her aunt from Bogota came a few weeks later with a little baby boy. They told him that the boy was his cousin, whose mother went to North America to work in a place called New York. They would look after this boy, Octavio, until the mother came back. She must have stayed in the US because Octavio became part of the family. His father surprised him again by accepting the little boy and the fiction of his arrival.

For some reason, his parents both assumed that Julio would look after his cousin Octavio, as he had ever since.

Octavio was his mother's darling, Julio knew, because Octavio needed her more. She often would say about Julio, that he was born an adult, an *hombre*. She neglected to add that her difficult marriage and her absences made his passage through childhood brief. She also indulged Octavio because he wasn't as smart as Julio or he followed his urges, his impulses. *Impulso*. *Muches impulso.* "What am I going to do with this boy?" she would ask as if the answer was clear: hug and kiss him more, in front of everyone, embarrassing him and annoying Julio. He had to hold back, but Octavio reached out at stands and stores to take whatever he wanted. Sometimes he got caught and Julio had to protect him or pay the store owner with money they couldn't afford. When they moved to Bogota, Octavio wasn't much better.

What settled for Julio that Octavio was his brother was his name. Beatrice loved Roman names. She had two years of high school before, four months pregnant, marrying his father. She found Roman history, magazines and books about Rome, at the Jesuit mission close to their home. She named one son for a Roman emperor. Julio saw, his cousin Octavio also had a Roman name. His mother and father didn't argue that much anymore, but Julio could see his mother was putting things away and planning. One day after his father left for teaching, his mother left a note on the kitchen table, along with his supper. The note said she was taking the children to Bogota, where she would find a job. She neglected to give him the address. This time she wasn't coming back.

With a valise she had packed for months, plastic bags with food and water, the three of them caught the rickety bus to the next city. Four buses and a few days later they arrived in Bogota. Beatrice's aunt Carmella lived in one of the shacks up the side of the hills; as they climbed toward the shack, Julio stared at the skyscrapers, as tall as the mountains. He remembered the aunt's house had a floor of plywood and the sides and roof sheets of plastic and metal. The aunt had a small pump, which brought water from a well. She gave the boys a bed in a tiny second room and put a cot out for his mother in the main room with the kitchen.

The boys wolfed down rice and beans with a few flakes of pork. Julio heard his mother tell the aunt that she left her husband because she deserved more than marriage to a teacher in a small town. There was nothing between them anymore, whatever that meant. Julio watched the aunt nod in the direction of his cousin Octavio and told his mother to be careful about her wishes. The aunt Carmella wasn't happy with their arrival, Julio could tell. His mother argued with the aunt too, although not so much as with his father. The aunt liked to order his mother and the kids around. She made them run errands for her and sent them to the store and didn't pay them back for what they bought. Soon after, his mother found a woman

in the market from the next barrio who let them stay with her for the pesos that his mother had hidden from his father. It was a worse neighborhood than his mother's aunt lived in. It was unsafe to walk around unless you were born there, belonged to a gang or had a pistol in your belt. The three of them went out together in the day time and at night, only close by.

One night, Julio and Octavio watched Beatrice dress up. Her blouse showed off her pointed tits. In the mirror, she put the rouge on her cheeks and eye stuff and lipstick on, running wet finger over her front teeth and smiling at her evident success. She took the boys out to a taco stand for the next few nights. A man came by, looked her over, and bought her a Coke. She sent the boys back to where they were staying and went with the man. The next day she came back like nothing had happened. When the man visited, she sent the boys out. He visited a lot. A few months later, his mother found a larger place and the man moved in. They called him “Uncle.” He talked with his hands, he said with a smile. When he didn't like what the boys did, he hit them, with his hands. An expression of affection, which stung and surprised, but didn't hurt that much. His mother assured the boys that Uncle would get used to having young boys around. He had callouses like leather gloves. He did small construction jobs in Bogota and whatever else he could find to do. He was also a criminal.

Uncle sent the boys to his cousin Antonio who had business with Uncle, mainly to get rid of them. Julio liked business, the buying and selling, something Octavio was too young to understand. They sold glue to the street kids, not much older than Octavio, to sniff in plastic bags. They also found customers for the boys and girls who needed a place to stay that night. They placed some children out to beg and protected them from rivals – after all, who owned a corner near a church or a theater? They took a percentage from the beggars as they did from all their enterprises, a modest one. Antonio explained to both boys, and Julio really listened: be careful about *avaricia*, greed; take enough for yourself and a little more, but not everything. Over time, you make more money and don't piss everyone off, he continued.

They had another business, theft. The little ones who bought their bags of glue grabbed purses from tourists, whose contents they dumped on a table in Antonio’s shack. It was closest time to a North American Christmas, when they did not know what they would find – money, jewelry, phones, or sometimes just candy wrappers. Antonio sent Julio to the school for thieves, because Colombian pick pockets were the best; he had Octavio practice with him: bump into a man to put him off-balance and while the man is struggling to stay on his feet, take the wallet out of his front or rear pocket. They called it plucking the chicken, *puntear la pollo*.

While Julio learned things of which his mother knew or wanted to know nothing, she still insisted that both Julio and Octavio go to the missionary school of American baptists, at least for two years. The boys

learned to read and write. Julio liked to study better than Octavio. He was good at math. They missed their father very little, although they were sure he could help them with their studies, not like Uncle who could not read beyond a lottery ticket. He was reaching his full height. Octavio more easily grew sideways, Julio thought, than up. They were happy, except for Uncle, really his roughness, and they settled in like a family. One night at supper when Octavio was chattering on as he is often did, Uncle leaned across the table and slapped him. Julio's fist shot out and hit Uncle in his big nose. Uncle fell back in his chair with blood coming down his best denim shirt. Julio's mother was yelling at him. Octavio ran into a corner. Uncle was very angry and not sure now that his hands would be enough. He went looking for a club to kill Julio with.

Julio ran out and did not go back. It was better for his mother and Octavio too, he realized. Julio was now as tall as Uncle and would not take Uncle's cuffs. He felt good, good to be out of there, good for striking back, although he missed his family already. Uncle's cousin sat down with him on the steps of his house and opened a bottle of beer, which they shared. “You come to work for me, all the time,” said Antonio. “I will make you a room in the warehouse, with a cot and you can wash up in the sink of the restaurant next door. We will make good business.”

Julio started with three streets in downtown Bogota, where the kids begged and stole. In bad weather, the kids retreated to the sewers; in good weather, they were in the parks or streets. They sniffed glue in the plastic bags, squirting the glue inside, sucking the gas into their lungs. They had rashes around their nose and mouth, but it was the only time they looked happy, Julio thought. He brought them the glue and plastic bags from local hardware stores and sold it for five times its cost. Antonio was tight: it was a good business and Julio always turned in every peso to him and then got his share. He saw that the basis of the business was selling something people needed, even more than food. When Octavio came by, Julio used to send him by bus to the big stores to buy more bags and glue. He was sure that Octavio tried the glue too, as he tried every food and drink that came his way.

Julio followed Octavio one day to watch him do business. Octavio sold the glue and plastic bags to the street kids out of a large canvas tote. He was stuffing pesos in his jacket, making sure to button his pocket shut. So far so good. Then Octavio gave one of the kids a little of his money back and sucked the gas from the kid’s plastic bag. He sat down with his customers and giggled along with them. Julio caught him on the next block and punched him in the chest to get his attention.

“If I catch you one more time, *maricon*, I'll cut a new asshole in your face.” Octavio seemed scared. He apologized, and would not do drugs again. Julio was sure now that Octavio tried everything he sold.

Antonio gave them both more streets. Now it took hours to cover them all. The money was good and getting better. One day Antonio told Julio to come back to his place right away. He usually smiled, but he looked grim. He unwrapped an oily cloth. In it was a black pistol, an old Brazilian revolver, scuffed and rusty. Uncle's cousin Antonio took a box of bullets from a chest of drawers in his room. On the table, he put down a can of oil and, with the cloth and a wire brush, cleaned the weapon; the cloth was black when he finished.

“What's this for, Antonio?”

“Every day, Julio, you are followed as close as shadows and you don't notice! In a couple of days, maybe tomorrow, you'd be dead. A gang wants your territory. They have knives.

“Let me tell you how it's done: One of them comes right at you. You think he punches you in the stomach, but at the end of his hand is a knife sharp as a barber's razor. It's in and out fast, and you try to keep your guts from falling out. So you have to do it before they do it to you.”

“Do what?”

“Use the gun.”

“Me? Why can't you do it? I work for you, Antonio. I bring you what I earn.”

“My eyes, my boy. I have something wrong with them: little black circles in the middle of what I see. That's why I don't try to go back to the States. What am I going to do? Beg?”

Julio understood that It was more than protection, what Antonio meant. These young men were competitors. Uncle with his strong hands usually protected them, but now he was getting soft or wasn't interested in the little Antonio paid. Julio had to attack one or two of the gang that followed him. If he brought one or two of them down, that might be enough. These amateurs were looking for quick money and taking over his area for the *inhalación de pegamento*, the glue sniffers, looked easy and paid well.

“I never shot anyone,” said Julio.

“Have you punched someone?”

“Yes, of course.”

“It's like punching somebody if your fist could reach out five or twenty or a hundred meters away and hit their body. They put up their hands to stop it, but it goes through anyway.”

“I don't know if I can do this.” Julio sat down. He couldn't stop from shaking his head no.

“Listen to me,” said Antonio. “Do you remember how the movie, *The Godfather, El Padrino*, how he got his start? It all begins with using a gun on the boss who stood in his way. In our business, there are no courts or police, unless we pay for them. We're too small to do that. So we have to be willing to fight for what's yours, ours. Do you want to go back to Uncle and your mother?”

Julio had seen the film about the Godfather on TV. This was life though. Movies ended with The End, but life went on and on, more like the soap operas his mother watched. Sure enough, as he made his rounds the next day, he saw four young men, his age and younger, shadowing him. Julio pulled together his courage. He could never return to live with Octavio, his mother and Uncle. Julio walked to the four boys, close enough to smell their beer-soaked breaths. He let them see the pistol in his belt. It was a mistake.

They moved around him, a circle, daring him to act as they got closer. The knives came out of sheaths from the back of their wide belts on their Americano jeans. He saw the points of their blades and could feel them piercing his body. He shot the one closest to him, the one who kept his knife at the right angle to slice him open like a bag of fruit. Pop-pop. The guy dropped the knife and fell down, hands to his wounds. The noise and smoke shocked them all. They scattered like cockroaches before the police came.

When Julio got back to tell him, Antonio took the gun from him, broke it down into pieces, and put them and the bullets into a sack. He left for a while to drop them into a sewer or the river. He came back.

“Give me the money you made today.”

“What for?”

“The cops were already here looking for you. Many saw you do it, but only one spoke up. I need to pay a police officer to look for another shooter and file the report. The boy did survive. The old bullets didn't have enough force. He's in the hospital and will come out looking for you. I was wrong. Not killing one of them has made them more angry. I've been thinking about this for a while. You need to leave. Uncle and I

will take over your territory. Octavio can help while you are gone. You are a smart kid and you have balls. More important, you are honest in your collections. Thieves steal from each other. It's our nature."

Antonio had a brother in the USA, Mihael, in a city near Boston, who needed someone smart and trustworthy to help run his business Antonio could not go; aside from his eye problems, he was on a list to be arrested for a crime he committed in New York years ago. If he got picked up, he could spend 10 years in prison. That's another reason he left the States. Julio was always learning things about Antonio, who got him a passport and ticket to America, which Julio paid back, first paychecks, double. Another expense: the right immigration lawyer, a *jurisconsulto*, so that Julio entered with a card to work called the green card. This way, he didn't have to look over his shoulder like the illegals.

Antonio counted out more cash and sent him out to buy new clothes and a valise. On his way back, Julio went to his mother's place. He was going to wait for Uncle to leave, but Julio walked in without knocking. Uncle must have heard about the shooting. Uncle cursed under his breath, and left the room. Julio told his mother and Octavio where he was going. They all hugged and kissed. Julio hadn't realized how much he missed her. He left them a little money. He told Octavio that he would send for him, for both of them, from Estados Unidos, the great country to the north. As he flew from Bogota, over the skyscrapers and mountains, he wondered if he'd ever return.

Outside of Boston, in an old industrial city called Everett, Antonio's brother Mihael had a garage, where Julio was employed as a mechanic although he didn't know how to fix anything. Mihael had connections and got him a green card so he could work and stay as long as he liked. Julio slept on a cot in the garage for the first year. He ran the businesses, not glue for the sniffers, but cocaine for rich and poor and for much more money than in Bogota. Mihael worked with him each day and night to show him how to manage the business, which he built from scratch. He had to fight the locals a dozen years ago to get his place, his niche he called it. Julio was afraid of Mihael like he was not afraid of Antonio. Mihael's face and hands were rough as if calloused from exposure and overuse. He wore his hair short like the Romans, he said, so no opponent could get a hold of it. He had hired other managers, but none of them worked out. Mihael wanted step back from the businesses, and collect his money, like a *patron*, on the old farms and ranches. He bought a place in Florida for the winters.

None of the other managers had worked out. Julio wasn't sure how they were fired or if they just sent back to Colombia or Mexico. Mihael didn't try to talk him of that suspicion that he was capable of killing the flunk-outs. He chuckled that he buried them in the back lot behind the garage. He didn't mean to use fear, but his determination to get his way was enough to instill it in his staff and his customers. The training period was six months. Julio knew he passed when Mihael gave him the keys one night and told

him to lock the garage. As long as Julio did not interfere with the business, and Mihael's cut was assured, Julio was in charge. From then on Mihael came in a couple of days a week and if the weather were fair, he'd cut those to play golf.

America truly was a land of opportunity. Julio met his customers in theater bathrooms, Home Depot parking lots, town parks; in the suburbs around Boston a popular distribution place was the stacks in the town libraries. Once in a while he drove large amounts of cocaine from Florida to New York and Boston. Or piggy-backed shipments onto the trailer trucks headed to the northeast from Arizona and New Mexico, his idea. Solve distribution and you can make most businesses work, he thought. At truck stops along the way, smaller shipments were passed along to vans. It was a smooth operation, this scheme of his, just missing the bar codes of the big carriers. He always saw ways of improving their business.

Julio made excellent money; the business of pleasure, he soon realized, was recession proof. People had to have it. Mihael had a small taxi business and a tow truck that worked on street cleaning for the different towns. Two cabs with two medallions, the license to run a cab, and very hard to get. In three years, Julio added two more medallions and cabs. Cabs were as common as flies in summer. No one paid attention to them and they were everywhere to distribute the girls and the drugs. Julio took English lessons, but he came too late to the States to lose his accent. He got his best ideas for expanding and improving the businesses from the magazines in his dentist's office.

Julio also met Felisa. He lived with her until she was going to have his first son. When they married his American bride, he had his own way toward citizenship, without the expensive immigration lawyer. He took his wife and their infant son to Bogota for their honeymoon. He stayed at the Continental on a high floor overlooking the barrios on the hills, where his mother and Octavio still lived with Uncle. He invited them all to the hotel for a feast. Antonio came too. His brother Mihael sent cash as a gift. Julio was relieved to hear that the boy he shot five years ago got religion from the North Americans, from an evangelista, and was clean and honest. He had looked for Julio a long time and then stopped. The police man they paid off probably forgot about the whole event.

Julio was so happy that he brought gifts to everyone, including Uncle, who fingered the new Stetson hat without putting it on. Julio rented a car and drove his family and Octavio to see his father, now retired from teaching, divorced from Beatrice and remarried. The town had not changed except that everyone seemed to have the newest electronics. His father was more like a stranger. His mind slipped back and forth from the past to the present and couldn't tell the difference. They did not stay long.

Julio returned to the States with his family and work. He had spent a small fortune on the trip and had a mortgage, car payments, and wife and kid to support. He was hardly home, his wife complained, who recommended that he bring Octavio in to help. He never thought of Octavio, as much as he loved him, as a help or asset. It was hard work, but he was doing well on his own. Julio only paid taxes on the salary he got from the garage, so the extra money from illegal business was like getting a thirty per cent bonus. He kept his own expenses down and saved up enough in two years to buy two more taxi medallions and expand his business from Everett-Chelsea-Revere to the western suburbs and higher paying clientele. He still did deliveries in Roxbury and Dorchester for Mihael. It was extra money. Julio's pager was going off day and night. He saw business opportunities everywhere and had his fingers, as his English teacher used to say, in every soup or pie, he couldn't remember which.

Like Antonio had told him in Bogota he'd have to, he learned violence. He carried a metal pipe with a taped handle under the seat in his car. Under his jacket he carried a hip holster with a snub nosed five shot revolver, a .357 whose flat head bullets could go through an engine block. Julio joked he made surgical strikes. He got the term from the evening news. Meaning, when he struck those who misbehaved, they needed surgery. If he was threatened by a competitor or even a customer owed him money, Julio listened and then hit hard enough so that they wouldn't bother him again. The first time he hit a man with his pipe he was nauseous, but the results were so positive – the debt paid promptly or the competitor discouraged – like most difficult things, it got easier with practice. He understood what a paradox meant: the less reluctant he was to use violence, the less he was required to use it.

By then he had reached his full height, over six feet, heavy-set, could take a punch and deliver a harder one in return. He protected his reputation – dependable worker, honest (even for a dishonest business), strong enough to pick up two 75 pound barbells, and break arms and legs like sticks with his pipe or ribs with a well placed punch. Probably something he learned in Uncle's school, he smiled.

He didn't need the pistol except for show or protection. When he came in to the house through the garage, he left his pistol in a locked cabinet, typed in the code, and entered. The house had thick metal-lined doors and an alarm system, in every entrance, the same ones Mihael had installed, from a company that protected banks. In the house, he kept another locked cabinet with a 17-shot 9 mm pistol and a double-barreled 12 gauge shotgun, both from customers to pay off their coke bills. Julio had to protect his family. His safe in the floor of the living room held cocaine and cash. Some gang, maybe bikers, would give a lot to open that safe.

As for Felisa, she had a way, like his mother, of looking past unpleasant things might alter her view of the world. Once when Julio and Felisa were watching the Scorsese film *Goodfellas*, she changed the

channel when the wife of the young hood took a wad of illegal cash from her husband and treated him to a blow job. It wasn't the blow job that turned her off; it was the tainted money. Felisa mentioned regularly how she wanted to move from Revere to the tonier suburbs of Weston or Lexington. Julio realized it was part of the deal, part of their marriage, although the blow jobs weren't a given and in fact rare.

Early one morning, Julio dropped off coke and collected cash from an apartment house in Roxbury. It was three AM, a rainy, blustery night in early spring. The curbs held dirty snow from a hard winter. He had double parked his wife's Toyota; his own Audi was in the shop. He came out of the building and walked toward the Toyota, locked and running. Holdup men preyed upon dealers like himself because they couldn't go to the police. There was always the danger of getting robbed of drugs, money or both. He noticed a nice black Mustang across the street, 18-inch wheels, the deep throb of specialty mufflers with the big V8. The passenger opened the side window and leaned out as if to ask directions. He shot at Julio twice, a black guy with an out-sized black Red Sox hat. In the rain, Julio could make out the "B" on the hat, the letters embossed with reflectors. He saw two flashes from the muzzle. One bullet hit the top of steps behind Julio with a howl. The second bullet hit his left shoulder, spinning Julio around like a revolving door.

Julio found himself sitting on the bottom step, a pod of pain bursting in his shoulder and arm. His pistol was already in his right hand. The black shooter was opening the Mustang's door to collect the money or the coke, and put one in his head, so sure that Julio was down. Julio lifted the pistol and aimed at the passenger side door as the shooter got out. Julio fired all five .357s into the Ford Mustang, the bullets slicing through the door and windows. Julio tried reloading, but he couldn't eject the spent cartridges and couldn't reload with one hand. He got up from the steps, and walked to the Mustang, his empty pistol now a club.

The driver's side door was open. The shooter had bled out in the car, the face on the dash. The driver's door was open too; the driver made it to the curb, where Julio could see his jaw was splintered; he was curled up in his own blood. Julio kicked the driver's head like he was punting for the Patriots. He got into the Toyota. Julio drove a couple of blocks and got out. He felt exhilarated, but stiff and wet with his own blood, contained in his shirt and jacket. He was nauseous with the start of shock. He found a beach towel in the trunk and stuffed it into his shirt as a pressure bandage. The adrenalin was wearing off and the pain was intense.

Felisa was right: he was alone, too much alone. Mihael had a rule that he stayed out of the details of the business. That's what he paid Julio for. Maybe running around by himself in these neighborhoods with pockets full of cash and coke was asking for trouble. Octavio would be better than no one. He might hire

someone good with a gun just in case. These two gunmen were way over-confident, probably on crack. A little more caution on their part and he'd be dead on those steps, fleeced of his money, drugs, and the rest of his life. He felt nothing for the two men, his own life a fair exchange for theirs. One thing for sure: Julio couldn't go home. And he might die anyway.

He had trouble thinking, Felisa never went anywhere without her Advils in the glove compartment. He chewed four down right away and drank one of bottled waters in the trunk. Julio found candy from the kids in the backseat – a squashed peanut butter cup that somehow had escaped his son Adam's grasp. Julio swallowed it even though he was nauseous. He knew he had to watch for shock. Sugar and fluids helped. He was glad he didn't have his six-speed Audi. Shifting would have been impossible.

Julio drove one-handed to Jamaica Plains. He had an apartment in Jamaica Plains, near the Pond. It belonged to Gloria, one of his pros, who skipped out last year and left him holding the lease. It was a small one bedroom, large enough for a makeshift hospital room or for one of his girls in trouble or a short-term rental. While he was looking in the bathroom mirror at the small, round angry hole in his shoulder, a .380 he guessed, he started to call someone, he couldn't remember, and dropped the phone anyway. He sat on the toilet and padded toilet tissue soaked with peroxide around the wound. He got up to hold onto the sink and watched the blood seeping onto the tiled floor. He threw up into the toilet and went back to cleaning the wound. The bullet didn't hit an artery, he knew, or he would be spraying, not seeping, blood. He thought of the MGH surgeon, one of his best customers. Julio reached the doctor's call service and introduced himself as a colleague, a Dr. Julio Mendes, their code for a drop-off.

The surgeon called right back. Julio explained that he had no health insurance, but would like to buy a policy now. He said now twice. He gave his address. The surgeon arrived in a half hour with his doctor's bag. A gun shot has to be reported, he said, but was willing to forgo that obligation.

“MAD. Mutually assured destruction,” said the doctor, whose eyes were wide with excitement.

“How's that?” asked Julio, as the doctor give him a shot to knock him out. The doctor said he had to dig away at the .380 poking out of the back of his shoulder.

“We know too much about either of us to give the other up,” the doctor said.

Julio gave the doctor six ounces of coke and three thousand in cash, with the same due his next visit. When Julio awoke, he had an IV dripping saline into his veins. The doctor was enjoying a line of coke off the glass coffee table. He got up wiping his nose.

“I've repaired everything I could see. We couldn't do an X-ray, but I think the bullet bounced off a bone. You should be OK unless you want to pitch for the Red Sox. It will take up to a year for everything to heal. We can't know about infection because this place isn't exactly an operating room. You need to take antibiotics for a few weeks. Call me tomorrow morning. Can anyone stay with you?”

Felisa dropped the kids off at her sister's and took a cab from Revere. She looked after him, held him against her in bed and rocked him. They had a rule: she didn't know details about his businesses, except that they could be dangerous. Her preferred ignorance was not for herself, but the children; in case Julio was indicted, at least one of them could raise their kids. Julio hinted at the drugs business, making it sound like he was an entertainer, the Jay Leno of narcotics. He left the girls, the prostitutes, out of their pillow talk. He was feeling better. He sent Felisa home to the kids the next day. The day after, he woke to chills and an infection about the size of a grape in his shoulder. His fever ticked up two points. The MGH doc arrived with syringes of high priced antibiotics. He also drained the wound. Julio slept for two days. Felisa returned with soups and stews. He ate little but his strength was returning.

Later in the week, Julio took a walk around Jamaica Pond, at night when only a few joggers or dog walkers were around. He had scrubbed the .357 with steel wool and soap. He found a couple of screw drivers in the kitchen cabinet and broke the pistol into pieces. He threw each piece into a different section of the Pond. He had Felisa bring him all the newspapers and he watched the local evening news. The deaths of two men in Roxbury were reported as a drug deal gone wrong, a phrase used so often about that neighborhood as to be ordinary, and the story faded to interior pages before disappearing. He had Felisa drive him one of the big malls the night before the weekly pickup. He had bagged the bloody clothes and shoes and dropped them in the dumpster . The next day, he told Felisa it was time for a new car. She always liked that idea. As they left the Toyota in the Lexus dealer's parking lot, Julio watched the last connection between the shooting and him. Any blood he left behind on the street was washed away by the rain.

When he went back to work, Mihael treated him like a relative. Although Mihael protested, Julio made good on the coke and cash he gave the surgeon. The two stickup men were buried by the state and no one showed up except the aunt of the younger guy. They didn't belong to a gang, so he didn't have to worry about revenge. He was putting everything back in place as if the shooting had not happened. But it had. Criminals gossip like housewives, he thought, and his reputation grew with the retelling of his killing the two thieves. He had dreams of the two men, what happened to them, what they were willing to do, almost casually, to him. Even in the rainy darkness, they looked deflated, shrunken, life leaking out of them. He was glad they were dead and if he could, he'd kill them again. A dealer from Georgia came into

the back of the garage and sold him another .357, this one with seven shots and a longer vented barrel. Revolvers never jammed. Julio's shoulder healed so he could play basketball with the guys at the garage.

The day Julio got his citizenship, they all celebrated, Mike too. Julio went to the immigration lawyer and sponsored Octavio as a legal resident. He worked for Antonio and didn't get into trouble. Julio had sent the money for his training. Octavio had finished high school and two years of technical school in Bogota to be an auto mechanic. He could work in Mihael's garage on the books, but his real job would be helping Julio in his businesses. The Sunday that Octavio arrived, Julio, Felisa and the kids drove down to Logan to pick him up. The kids were excited.

Julio hadn't seen Octavio in three years, since his honeymoon – Octavio was taller, more filled out, perhaps too filled out because he still loved his sweets, his *melados* and *flan*. The kids ran forward to hug their uncle, as they were told he was. Cousin or brother, too complicated for the kids and even for himself, Julio thought. He put his arms around Octavio, to welcome him to America. Octavio blinked back tears. “Julio,” he said in much practiced English. “I going to Disney World!”

The Medallion/Chapter Three: Kaddish for Sue Hardwick

Detective Benjamin Schwartz punctured his finger and put a drop of blood, no bigger than a tear, on the instrument that checked his blood sugar. It was over 250; he knew he should not have eaten the cruller this morning without walking it off. He spent most of this day at his desk and one stop at court for a deposition; something about cops and donuts, the tired jokes of late-night comics, he thought, like ethnic jokes, the same tired splashing around in the gene pool: Italians and organized crime, Irish and alcohol, Jews and money – wait a second, he interrupted himself.

Since he was a Jew, not observant but a Jew all the same, and loved donuts, sweets of any kind, regardless of his diabetes, and couldn't balance his checkbook, so where did that put him? Probably an evolutionary stumble for the Semites, he thought. His mother wanted him to be a high class lawyer like his cousin Merton Fine, whose custom-made shirts and ties cost more than her son's suits. Schwartz told his mother that he was still in law, the enforcement part. He arrested bad guys, and maybe someday Cousin Merton. At least she laughed.

He pinched his left arm to find a softer spot to inject. There weren't many left. He dreaded the next step, the needle. A diabetic who can't stand needles is like a squirrel who can't stand heights. Not a great adaptation, he thought. The detective drew the dosage into the syringe. He pushed the plunger slightly losing a trace of insulin to avoid putting air into his body. He rubbed the alcohol swab on the spongiest part of his arm, which had experienced hundreds of similar strikes. He was a Type 2 diabetic and got the illness in his 40s, but pills alone did not work. The needles were thin enough to go into a pore, he thought; it still hurt. Schwartz was starting to use the folds of his stomach to inject.

Schwartz thought about solving a crime not like assembling a scattered puzzle, the pieces spread about, the test of patience, experience, intellect and spatiality. It was more like connecting the dots, except in the daylight you couldn't see all the dots, like the stars only show themselves at night. He liked that metaphor better. With the Hardwick case, he couldn't see all the dots between her murder and all the other events and suspicions. When he finally saw all the dots and connected them, the case solved, the detective asks himself, “How could I have missed that?” You missed it, thought Schwartz, because the detective does not create knowledge any more than he creates the victim or the guilty. Knowledge emerges from evidence, which he has to find and interpret. It’s not science, as they say: it’s art.

The murder of Susan Hardwick, M.D. Thus far, the evidence hadn't changed, information in a time capsule ten years old, or really in a cardboard evidence box in storage. Schwartz always hoped for more evidence. Or some crook, facing an intolerable number of years, snitches on an acquaintance or his own

brother. Professor Sue Hardwick, attacked off Albany Avenue a decade ago, dragged into an alley by a belt around her neck and then stabbed multiple times.

She was his case. Each year the cup of boiling frustration and failure bubbled to the surface and burned him into action. Each year at this time he made sure to get to a synagogue and say a prayer for the dead, a Kaddish, for Dr. Hardwick. A distinguished professor of surgery at BU, she was photogenic, often on a local TV station to explain illnesses in season, like the flu. For many, she was a feminist icon. Each year, the anniversary, he also stopped by her grave. He couldn't quite get why would anyone attack her with such ferocity. One stab wound punched through both cheeks. In what have been the final thrust, the killer broke off the tip of the blade in a rib. From this fragment they learned that the weapon was a chef's kitchen knife, cutlery for a restaurant or upscale home, the medical examiner suggested, easily bought in stores, on the Internet or even a yard sale. The rest of the weapon was probably deep in the silt of Boston Harbor.

No robber. At least no one took the petite Rolex on her left wrist and a one-caret engagement ring, or the platinum wedding band, white as the lady's hand. Someone who hated her, judging by the wounds. By a lover, he wondered. The one piece of missing jewelry was a locket. It was Victorian heart-shaped jewelry, 14k gold, which broke in half from a clasp, with pictures of her husband and her son, taken four or five years ago. Her favorite piece, the locket was missing from her jewelry case. It could have been any of her other necklaces and she had lost the locket and was embarrassed to say so. Her husband did not know what she was wearing the morning she left. What was sure is that a chain bit into her neck as the killer yanked it off, apparently after she was stabbed and trying to breathe through her own blood.

Meanwhile the newspapers did story after story about the med school prof brutally murdered (was there any other kind of murder, Schwartz asked himself). His boss asked Detectives Ben Schwartz and Alphonse Di Natale, as the newspapers identified the lead investigators, every few days how things were going. They drew the list of suspects from concentric circles, family, friends or enemies, fellow workers, then the rest of humanity. Did she flunk a med student? Did she find one of them taking drugs or molesting patients? Didn't seem likely and would have been too easy a solution to be real.

As for the husband, he collapsed when he identified the body and was under sedation before they could interview him. Schwartz remembered how he looked: grief shrunk the man. Besides, he was nowhere near where Dr. Hardwick was killed. A literature professor, he was having dinner with colleagues and got home just as the police arrived. The son, Dr. Hardwick's from her first marriage, was in private school in New Hampshire, asleep in his dorm when security came to get him. At the funeral, the boy's acne flared like welts.

Schwartz and Di Natale worked the case hard. They interviewed colleagues, friends, neighbors, the cleaning crew at the med school, anyone associated with Hardwick's life. They checked police data files for anything that stood out. Several times, as they came up with very little, he reminded Di Natale that he got paid anyway. It's a job, he told him, the words as hollow as spent cartridges, noise and smoke. Cold solace. Schwartz was lucky to have Al Di Natale, his partner for the past 11 years, exactly a year before Hardwick died.

Di Natale was younger than Schwartz by 20 years, younger and in great health, a track star in college who scored the high in the competitive exams, and won a kind of fame as a uniformed cop for talking a young man down from the outside rail of the Tobin Bridge. After three months, four months, and then five and six, they started attending to more recent cases. Murder hadn't stopped since she was killed. Then it was one day a week for Hardwick and then one a month. And then the anniversary like today.

Schwartz never forgot Sue Hardwick, which was another way of saying he didn't want to. He heard enough stories about compulsions to know that choice, the decision to commit the crime or carry on an investigation, often was camouflage for compulsion, the person couldn't help himself. Schwartz wanted to bring the killer in, that was that. He didn't believe in capital J Justice, in the absolutes of his parents, justice guaranteed by the Creator. There was still, however, justice in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, whose laws he had sworn to uphold.

The public's memory was short, but his was long, too long for the peace of mind his wife wanted for him. Out there, and the thought was pinch of sand in the machinery of his mind, was a murderer, who ate, drank, read magazines or watched TV, while Sue's body went back to the elements that gave her life. It wasn't right, not for Sue or her family or for the way Schwartz viewed the universe and the place for justice in it.

The department had a list of unsolved cases, longer than they liked to admit. In a way, the count would shock the public and perhaps encourage more murder. A separate email went to each detective twice a year, copies to the department head and the commissioner, rumored not to read it. The unsolved cases stayed on the emails for as long it took to close them. The day Schwartz retired, he imagined himself leaving those people, the three dead, their photographs in the evidence box, behind. He knew the cemeteries where they were buried, his open cases. He was pretty sure of the murderers in two, but could not prove it. In one case, his prime suspect died from tainted beef and had not spoken to anyone in the last week of his life, let alone confess. An undercooked burger laced with E. Coli at a neighbor's

barbecue – was that the agent of cosmic justice? He doubted it. Sue Hardwick's was his last open case, the one about which he did not have even a theory. Not a clue, to use an expression.

So when the email about open cases arrived, Schwartz went over his notes, again. When he originally interviewed Sue's family and her friends, the affection from her colleagues was touching. He didn't sense jeaBensy from them, although she wrote in the leading journals and created a surgical procedure that still carried her name. Even the patients whose outcomes were not positive, even they spoke with reverence. A few wept openly about Dr. Heartwick, their play on her name Hardwick. Schwartz looked for a disgruntled patient or family member and could find none. One of her gal pals, as a colleague referred to herself, thought that Sue was a terrific wife. In the exchange in a marriage, the friend implied, the give and the take, Sue gave more than her husband.

A few years later, Schwartz was in a Peabody hospital visiting a fellow officer having knee replacement. Schwartz met the surgeon, Dr. Rashmi, who remembered him from the investigation into the Hardwick murder. Dr. Rashmi and Dr. Hardwick were colleagues. Shortly before her death, he asked her to take over a complicated case on the north shore, in this very hospital, a case which did not turn out well. Not quite a botched operation, rather a botched diagnosis, where Dr. Hardwick and especially the radiologist misread the X-ray. They believed they were facing a hernia repair and found advanced disease, which surgery could not correct. The patient was prepped, opened and closed. Dr. Hardwick with Dr. Rashmi behind her gave the bad news to the family. The oldest son, according to the hospital staff, screamed at the doctor until security escorted him out. The patient died a few months later. Dr. Rashmi never explained why it took him this long to mention this incident to the police. He apparently didn't think it that important.

For his part, Schwartz never thought of asking colleagues outside of the medical school and its patient list. He never thought that doctors, Hardwick included, moonlighted. He thanked Dr. Rashmi and got the name of the family. Schwartz found that the son, Chester Winters, had a temper. He was a burly kid who had spent a few days in juvenile detention and two years probation for taking a swing – and connecting with the jaw – of his high school math teacher. The teacher accused Chester of cheating, which Chester finally admitted to but not before being kicked out of school and sued by the teacher for the cost of one dental implant, as well as pain and suffering.

That record was closed because Winters was a juvi, a juvenile, but Schwartz found the story in the archives of the local Walpole newspaper. Winters was not named directly. To be sure, Schwartz called the Peabody police and talked with the investigating officer named Caldecott, who mentioned Chester's problems with authority. Chester's father, a weekend drinker, mistreated his kids, mostly with words,

whose wounds, Schwartz noted in his career, can last far longer than a bruise. Chester was his favorite target, yet Chester threatened Sue Hardwick over the missed diagnosis that freed him from his father's wrath. Chester was a center for the high school football team with the kind of legs and bull neck so he would have no trouble dragging Sue Hardwick's 115 pounds down an alley way, kneeling on her chest to stab her. Schwartz wondered about the sincerity of the boy's outrage, but you never know.

The detective got excited. When he got like that, Di Natale left him alone. Schwartz tacked Winter's football picture, the crouching center, grimace and all, onto the bulletin board near his desk, along with three photos of Sue's crime scene, now curling with age. The killer used a thick belt with a brass buckle to drag the victim. Schwartz fantasized the court order allowing him to search Winter's apartment or house and finding the belt. Most likely it was in some landfill rotting to oblivion. Still, Schwartz felt his vision tightening like a thumb on the focus wheel of binoculars. Every day he inquired about Chester Winters. The computers came up with nothing. If Winters were dead, then the lead would end, what they called a stub.

It turned out to be another wasted week, another couple of pages in the appendix of failure at the end of Sue Hardwick's bulging file, where Schwartz kept false leads, just in case. He kidded himself that it was not retentiveness, that he could always learn from his errors. He couldn't see weeks of work going into the shredding bin. Besides, he was accountable for his time and – the expression from his immigrant parents – you never know when you need something. You never do, he assented.

Officer Caldecott phoned that he reached Chester's aunt still living in the area: Chester, now in his early 30s, was in an auto accident a week before Sue was killed and was in rehab for a month from broken collar bone. After a full recovery, the young man finished high school and joined the Army. He graduated from a community college and was now the assistant manger of a Walmart outside of Washington, D.C. It seems that the abusive father's death was a gift of sorts. A few months after his outburst, the suspect probably wanted to give Dr. Hardwick a medal.

It was anniversary of her death, the tenth, so the detective looked again at Hardwick's colleagues. Schwartz went over motive again: It was easy, he calculated, to be envious of Sue Hardwick. Her colleagues all professed affection and respect without a hint of envy. Schwartz assumed they should. She was slim as a New York model, athletic, aging beautifully, her skin brilliant, offset by flecks of gray in her hair. She worked long hours without complaint. She was achieving all her goals, breaking a sweat without showing the sheen, on her way to lead a department or maybe the med school itself. Hell, Schwartz thought, she was a TV star during the flu season, assuring parents and giving advice, with a smile as bright as the weather gal on the show. Rather than causing jealousy, however, she promoted the work of

her colleagues and encouraged their own success. None had a complaint and all would have been happy if she took over the department.

No affairs either, none that he could discern for Dr. Hardwick or her husband, Peter. Di Natale and he had asked neighbors, colleagues and friends about Peter Hardwick – a professor of Victorian literature at Boston University – for anything out of the ordinary before the murder. It did not look as if Professor Hardwick had another woman in his life. Hardwick, slim, tall, a black beard laced with silver like frost, so handsome he was pictured on BU brochures at his lectern, his hand raised, making a point sure to change scholarship forever. The one son they had, really shared, was from Sue Hardwick's previous marriage. Schwartz noted that like so many successful people who seem to rocket to success without detour or deflect, Sue certainly had her ups and downs, to use his mother's expression. As a student in med school, Sue married another doctor, Gary Howard, with whom she had a son.

Dr. Howard was an Army reservist physician, killed in a training exercise, a helicopter crash, at Ft. Bragg. In spite of this loss, Sue finished med school, her residency, contributed to and then wrote a page full of articles on surgery, got a gig on local TV, all the while bringing up her son, an infant when his father died. Sue Howard met Peter Hardwick on a Governor-appointed panel for improving education. According to friends, Sue fell in love right away with the handsome Hardwick. That was the stock epithet when people described him, handsome,with his slight English accent, either influence or affectation from his degree at Oxford. According to the same friends, their marriage seemed to very happy, although, one friend confided, no two people love alike and in this case, Sue loved more than Peter. Peter also encouraged the boy to go to the best private schools, including one in New Hampshire. This gave them both the freedom to pursue their careers. One close friend told Schwartz that Peter Hardwick liked to be the center of Sue's attention.

In the first few years after the murder, Schwartz kept an eye on Professor Hardwick for suspicious behavior. He had not remarried in three months, or even since her death, the kind of thing that caught attention. He did take leave after his wife's death, whether mental or physical health was the issue, no one knew. The Hardwicks were insured for a million and so he had ample money to pay off their mortgage and to finish paying for the son's prep school, and then four years at Harvard, easily several hundred thousand. The boy, David Howard, chose Harvard although he could have gone to his stepfather's university tuition-free. At the funeral and police interviews, David was cool toward Peter Hardwick, who resumed teaching with a reduced load, and then back to full time teaching and scholarship. As a lead or suspect, another stub.

The detective opened the thick file. He knew his notes by heart. Dr. Hardwick left work at 10:15, so said her card key swipe as she exited the building. Her time since death (TSD) was between 10:30 and 11:00. Sue Hardwick usually didn't work that late, since her days began by seven, an assistant told him. A surgery she did that morning had complications. She stayed late to see her patient improve while she worked on a paper she was giving in Indianapolis the following month. Schwartz knew this because he sat in her office, in her chair, felt the creases her body made in the soft leather in the past six years. Hardwick didn't lock her computer. She kept it in sleep mode: a simple move of the mouse opened up all her personal files.

The paper came up under Most Recent Files as soon as he touched the screen. She didn't worry about anyone reading her work, nor did she worry about walking alone late at night. Men didn't, she told a colleague. Why should she, for a ten minute walk? She passed the same alley for six years to get to her BMW, a present to herself from her last promotion, in the university lot. It was darker than usual. A street lamp nearby needed replacement and had for months; it flickered on and off, mostly off (the city put in another bulb after the murder).

Around 10:00 o'clock, a homeless person was on his way to the Oak Street Inn for a meal and a cot when he noticed a shiny black car circling the neighborhood and then parking a couple of blocks from the murder scene. Sal McNaughton, the social worker who ran the shelter, heard the story while serving meals at the soup kitchen and called. Schwartz came by the Inn with a bag of groceries, as his thanks. The vagrant – Schwartz thought the word he grew up with, but homeless was the proper term – was sure it was a black sedan, probably a Ford or Chevy. A variety store owner up the street also had seen a dark colored vehicle, although he was sure it was a Buick.

It was a Ford, a Taurus. Di Natale found it on an ATM three blocks away, its camera pointed at an intersection. The bank IT person sent an attached file with four cars at the time of the murder, one gray and three blacks. The detectives ran the license numbers, one for a woman in her 70s and five-two on her driver's license. One of the black cars was owned by a man in his 40s, a black car, a Taurus, and was in the neighborhood within an hour of Hardwick's death. Stanley Brill didn't live in the neighborhood, but in Dedham, with his wife and two kids, teenagers. He had no priors and was the head mortuary attendant at a funeral parlor in his town. Hence, the black car, thought Schwartz.

No connection to Hardwick, it seemed, but it was all Schwartz and Di Natale had. Stanley Brill asked to meet him at a coffee shop in the town. Brill explained that he kept his personal life aside from his work. His employer and his friends did not know about his brother, an alcoholic homeless person. He lived on the streets, except for deep winter when he went to the shelter. He left as soon as he could, in early

spring, so he could drink when he wanted: some drunks braved sub-zero weather, so they could continue drinking. His brother still had that much regard for his life. The detective called the Inn to confirm Brill's story. While Hardwick fought for her life three blocks away, Brill was sitting with his brother at the Inn over a meal of franks and beans.

The detectives spent an afternoon in the neighborhood asking residents about a dark or black car. Finally they got lucky with a camera near an all-night drug store, a dark blue Buick, with a license plate that they could read. It was another fruitless, another stub leading nowhere.

The Buick belonged to a physician from Wellesley, a dermatologist. Perhaps a connection between two physicians, Dr. Hardwick and Dr. Van Ness? Schwartz and Di Natale probed deeper into the coincidence. It turned out that Dr. Van Ness from Wellesley went to med school at the University of Hawaii, not like Sue Hardwick who went to prep school in New England and from there schools in the Boston area, all the way through her residency at Boston Medical Center.

Dr. Van Ness spent most of his life on the west coast. A few years ago he came east to work on a drug trial. The illness was vitiligo, the loss of skin pigment, particularly noticeable in the Afro-American community. The doctor told Di Natale that he donated his time to a vitiligo clinic in black neighborhoods. Schwartz interviewed the secretary of the clinic, a black woman covered with splotches of white skin and freckles. Van Ness came to them once a month to try new prescriptions on his patients and check on their progress. He was with a half dozen patients when the murder took place.

Di Natale was better at handling the frustration (his word), the failure (Schwartz's) over the Hardwick case. Schwartz felt his patience bleed out. He had to let go. They had other cases. Humanity's tendency for murder hadn't stopped since Dr. Hardwick was its latest victim. But Sue Hardwick, the case, stayed with Schwartz like a slowly healing scar. If someone asked Schwartz, "Are you satisfied with your life, your wife, your kids?", he'd answer yes, yes, yes, but …. Dr. Sue Hardwick would be the *but*.

Schwartz was looking at the end of his career, or certainly the beginning of the end, to give it Churchillian drama. His illness alone might be enough to take early retirement. When the job turned rough, too many hours and too many shifts, still his wife would say, "Just like Jack Nicholson. In *The Pledge*." There, the retired homicide cop goes nuts looking for a child molester and killer. He ends up alone, shunned by his fellow cops and the woman he loves, the kid he tried to protect. The last scene he is in an alcoholic haze. Schwartz tried to convince Evie that the plot did not make sense, although Nicholson was a great actor, even if he rooted for the LA Lakers over the Boston Celtics.

Schwartz broke the needle and dropped it into a bio-hazard bin. Long ago, he stopped fighting his skepticism and let the job transform him. To be good at it, the job, he had to. He wasn't wearing the stubby .40 caliber Glock on his belt because the world was full of Salvation Army bell ringers. After all, in his line of work you tried to look dispassionately at the body of a little girl who was sodomized and then cut ear to ear, red as a clown's mouth. You try to bring the guilty to justice, including the mother who let the murderer into the house, shared his crack pipe and defended him in court as her boyfriend. To admit it so would be to accept her own guilt and betrayal. And then there were attorneys who wanted to trip you along the way, thought Schwartz. Anything to win, to get the boyfriend and the mother off. Sometimes Detective Schwartz wished that Lady Justice would lift her blindfold and peek at the misery he saw.