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## Taking a meeting with Mr. Roast Beef

CALL ME A CYNIC, BUT I maintain that nothing can clarify a man's thinking quite like looking down the barrel of a revolver in the hand of a man who is irked with you and considering homicide as a solution to his problems. This has happened to me from time to time in my so-called career as a private eye in St. Paul, Minnesota, and each occurrence promoted clear thinking, inconvenient though it was at the time. Christians try to find clarity through prayer, but you don't really know what prayer is until you meet someone who's prepared to shoot you. I am thinking in particular of an afternoon last February when an eighty-two-year-old



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gorilla named Joey Roast Beef sat quivering in my office on the twelfth floor of the Acme Building with a cocked pistol aimed at my chest and ordered me to tell him something that I had no intention of telling him because it involved the beautiful prospect of vast wealth I was in no mood to share. His hairy finger was coaxing the trigger and he yelled, "Talk to me!" and suddenly everything got clearer, *The Delicate Beauty of Life and its Fragility* and *The Sudden Relative Insignificance of Constitutional Law and the Dow-Jones Average*.

MOMENTS BEFORE, ON THIS PARTICULAR February day, on the twelfth-floor, high above the poor souls struggling through the crotch-high snowbanks along Latimer Street, all was well, no inkling of imminent peril. I was savoring page fourteen of a trashy novel in which a twenty-three-year-old fashion model is attracted to a heavysset sixty-four-year-old galoot in a wrinkled blue suit and the two of them are sharing chicken quesadillas and his knee is pressed firmly to her thigh and she does not seem to mind. I was thinking about ordering a chicken sandwich from Danny's Deli and hoping Danny would add it to my tab, though my tab was long, two or three hundred bucks, which is not good, but business had been slow and a guy's got to eat. Chicken on a kaiser, slice of onion, and a squort of hearty mustard to clear the sinuses. My long underwear had gotten bunched up in a way that made me think about my prostate, and I was thinking about that, and the sandwich, and the fashion model ("her thigh was firm but pliable,

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even, he hoped, complaisant”), while listening to a voice mail from Doris, my landlady at the Shropshire Arms, saying she’s sick and tired of me being two months late on the rent, and the honeyed voice of my ex-love Sugar saying she’s sorry but she can’t have lunch with me on my birthday in March (*Sixty-five!!! Moi??? The poor man’s Philip Marlowe? Yikes!!!!*) because she and Wally are taking a Caribbean cruise—so I’m in a Dark State of Mind when I hear heavy thumping on the door, and the thumper yells, “Hey, Noir, open up. I know you’re in there, ya duckbutt.” And it was him, the Senior Citizen of Organized Crime.

“The office is closed, Joey,” I said in a calm, businesslike tone of voice.

“Not to me it ain’t.” And he threw open the door and stomped in, all 340 pounds of him. “Forgot to lock your door, Noir. What a genius. It’s amazing someone didn’t rub you out a long time ago.”

He was draped in a blue seersucker suit, like a toad in gift wrap, and a yellow shirt and pink tie, his thinning black hair slicked back, peering out through thick black horn-rims, and he looked like one of those fat generalissimos with a chestful of medals who run banana republics, though the jacket lapels had traces of schmutz on them, but his beetle brow was set for battle, his jaw jutting out, his dew-laps quivering, he was wheezing—as you or I would if we were five feet four and weighed 340 pounds and carried an oxygen tank with a plastic tube stuck up our nose.

“No ‘Good morning’?” I said. “No ‘How are you’?”

“I know how you are. You are in big, big trouble, smart guy. I’m done with you. If you don’t tell me what I need to

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know, you're gonna be swimming in the river in a pair of concrete shoes." He lowered himself gingerly into my old oak chair, which groaned under him, pulled out his Colt .45, and aimed it at my sternum. It appeared to be loaded. With bullets. Real ones.

"I'm expecting visitors, Joey," I said in the same calm tone. "Lieutenant McCafferty and Captain Calhoon. Our weekly hand of whist. So I don't have time for an extended visit."

It was a lie, of course, but when dealing with an angry, armed man, you'd like him to think that witnesses could arrive at any moment.

"This won't take long. About two minutes. The word on the street, Noir, is that you are holding out on me on a very lucrative deal involving millions—and you made a big, big mistake thinking I'm such a ditz I wouldn't get wind of it, which is a grave insult. I am not the type of person who accepts being insulted. And I'm gonna give you about two minutes to tell me what is the deal and when do I get my split," he said. "So out with it. Sing. Let's hear it."

"Give me a hint," I said. "I got no idea what you're talking about. You want to know who to pick in the seventh at Belmont? You want the formula of the hydrogen bomb? Warren Buffett's cell phone number? What you want, Joey?"

"It involves you and that hootchie-kootchie dancer at the Kit Kat Klub named Naomi Fallopian. The one who got her Ph.D. and now she's teaching women's rights or something at the U. So let's start with her." He shifted his enormity in the chair, and it groaned, and I could imagine it

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collapsing and him sprawled on the floor, a mountain of adipose tissue, and me leaping up and whacking him senseless with the desk lamp. I could also imagine the shock of the fall twitching his trigger finger and a poof of flame and the bullet hitting me in the frontal lobe and turning me into a human cauliflower. The second possibility seemed more likely.

He cleared his throat. "This dame and you. You two are walking around about to make a killing and sashay off to a penthouse somewhere with a revolving king-size bed under a silver ceiling mirror with her in her pink peignoir reflected in it, and that's okay, I don't begrudge you the comforts of life, I'm only looking to collect my share, otherwise Miss Fallopian is gonna be wearing a black suit and a hat with a veil and crying into a hanky as she gazes at the china vase containing your ashes." He set the pistol down on the desk and adjusted his air hose, which was taped to his upper lip.

I said, "Joey, I respect your perspicacity in most things, but as to this scuttlebutt somebody sold you about me and Miss Fallopian, Joey, you are woofing down the wrong rainbow, there is no pot of gold at the end, just an old private eye with lower back pain and a pocketful of breath mints, namely me. There is no killing about to be made. Whoever whispered this in your ear is pulling your leg. I say this as an old and dear friend. This is delusional thinking, Joey. If you're not careful, you're going to wind up on the funny farm, talking to the window shades."

I was hoping to build doubt in the man's mind, but his firm grip on the peashooter indicated otherwise. He was in



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no mood for Story Hour. "Tell me what's going on, Noir, or else you are gonna get you a new buttonhole. Right in between those other buttonholes."