

THE BRONZE DAME

By

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The Bronze Dame

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ABSTRACT:

The Bronze Dame is an experiment, in which I attempt to blend the rigorous structuring of the East with the itinerant, gritty styling of the West. Many early, twentieth-century, Western influences can be found in my protagonist, Allen Crosse. Crosse is a blend of Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, infused with the voice and countenance of Humphrey Bogart (who filled the shoes of both grim detectives on the Silver Screen). Crosse's world is inspired by the colorful language of Robert E. Howard and peopled with an eccentric cast, which aspires to the emotional and physical diversity of the casts in both Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* and Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*. I attempt to fill my work with characters as contrastingly different as those portrayed by Jack O'Halloran, Sydney Greenstreet, and Peter Lorre. I also attempt to give the narrative pace the uniquely complex, consistently interesting tone of Anton Karas' "Harry Lime Theme," which is featured throughout Carol Reed's *The Third Man*. Reed's *Third Man* showcases the snappy, intelligent dialogue of Graham Greene's screenplay – a display I endeavor to emulate.

In terms of the East, I adhere to the "traditional" English formatting rules for the structuring of haiku (the vehicle in which I tell my tale): three lines, with a syllable count of five, seven, and five, in the first, second, and third line, respectively. However, I choose to omit the obligatory kireji (pause) that comes at the end of either the first or second line, opting instead for pauses when and if I see fit. I also choose to omit the kigo (season word), in which the renga (reference to the natural world) is set. The result is a terse, tightly edited voice that tells the story of a witty, perceptive hero, who, in Chandler's words, is the "best man in his world, and a good enough man for any other." True to form, the hero prevails – but not without losing a piece of himself to his dark, female antagonist in the process.

This is where *The Bronze Dame* strives to set itself apart; most of the pulps of the 1920s and '30s attempt to victimize their supporting female casts. They rarely call these females to the center stage and almost never give them the voice and presence necessary to move from the second to the third dimension. They characterize their women in much the same fashion that I characterize Gwen Pierce: as beautiful and Janet Leigh's Susan Vargas, as steadfast as Alida Valli's Anna Schmidt, and as pitiful as Mary Astor's Brigid O'Shaughnessy. Kailani Knieht is the kind of exotic beauty that every man meets in passing once or twice in a lifetime – the kind of woman who ages like wine in his imagination's memory. She embodies the timeless beauty of Chandler's Helen Grayle, the cool, calculating cruelty of Lauren Bacall's Vivian Sternwood Rutledge, and the blazing, mentally deranged sexuality of Martha Vickers' Carmen Sternwood (with the ethnic kick of Zsa Zsa Gabor – another rarity in female antagonists).

Realizing such legendary beauty on paper is no mean feat, though, if I have achieved even a tenth of the experience – the torrid, unholy love affair that plays out in a man's mind in the brief, life-altering moments, in which he passes such a woman on the street – then *The Bronze Dame* is an utter success. If I have failed on this front, well, no one can deny that Ms. Knieht is still quite a looker. At the very least, a man might pay her a backward glance in passing, sentence fragments colliding in his mind. Those eyes. That smile.

A note on syllable count:

As a general rule of thumb, if the utterance of a prefix, infix, or suffix does not result in a vowel sound or a vowel sound accompanying a consonant, I do not count that sound as a syllable. The suffix –le, for instance, is not considered a standalone syllable in this body of work. Therefore, “sizzle,” “hobble,” and “rifle” are considered single syllable words, unless the context they are being used in mandates a verb tense of present continuous, in which case the –ing ending is, of course, considered an extra syllable. All contractions (such as couldn’t, wouldn’t, shouldn’t, haven’t, hadn’t, didn’t, don’t, can’t, won’t, etc.) are, likewise, considered single syllable words.

A note on spelling:

For a little over four hundred years, the word, “today,” was hyphenated. The *singulare tantum*, “to-day,” saw its origin in the sixteenth century and died a quiet death in the early twentieth century – but not before seeing through the Jazz Age, the age of flappers, Prohibition, and hardboiled detectives. “Tonight” and “tomorrow” were also hyphenated throughout the Roaring ’20s (i.e.: “to-night” and “to-morrow”).

Nearly a decade after the 1920s – 1939, to be precise – Raymond Chandler published *The Big Sleep*. Every time the word, “okay,” appears in his text, it is spelled with an “e” (i.e.: “okey”). In my research, I’ve found this to be one of Chandler’s idiosyncrasies – for such a spelling is surely not a standard of the time period.

In my text, I embrace these archaic (and, in Chandler’s case, deliberately wayward) spellings – if for no other reason than to make for an authentic experience, in the reading. Although, in remaining completely authentic to the actual year, in which *The Bronze Dame* takes place (a year that I will leave to be discerned by the savvy reader), I might have left out that late Depression-Era Chandlerism, as it is the only word in this body of work that was coined after the story occurs.

Why include it anyway? As an homage. And because it was fun.

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I.

A Dark and Stormy Knieht

He read through his scotch
glass: “.👁️ etavirP :essorC nellA”
Then he drank her deep.

“My name is Gwen Pierce.”
A raindrop threatened to drip
from her lip. “Hello.”

Her husband, she cooed,
was killed. She was being framed.
Save her pretty neck.

Her husband, Crosse mused,
had a fetish for gorgeous
cutthroats. Like all men.

Still, he took the case.
She paid well, and he was broke
and three drinks too dry.

★

He started with the
mistress. Torch singer. Saxton
Club. Gwen liked her voice.

“Youse ain’t gettin’ in,
flatfoot.” President Lincoln
changed the doorman’s mind.

Cigarette girls, dice,
and drinking men. A full house
and guffaws. Hot jazz.

Crosse cut through the room.
Through the smoke, a silver spot
splashed on blue velvet.

Her voice, first. Cleaved his
guts. Then the curtains drew wide.
Enter: the bronze dame.

A sea of sequin,
crimson, like desire and
frustration. Those eyes.

Euphoric cherub
in the crown moulding. Crosse smirked.
“You and me both, pal.”

He turned down a cute
offer on his way backstage.
“Roll my own smokes, thanks.”

Two palookas, huge
like gorillas, stood outside
her dressing room door.

Crosse brought out his flask.
He took a swig and dabbed some
on. Just like cologne.

He slapped a massive
shoulder. “Hey, fella’. (*Hic!*) There’s...
there’s a fire out front.

“I seem ta... have lost
m’ciggarette in the coat room...”
They loped off like apes.

Her dressing room smelled
perfect. Timeless. Jasmine and
sage. He told her so.

“Who are you?” She spat
hatefully. “What do you want?”
“Just a kiss.” Crosse grinned.

“Rocco,” she called. “Ton –”
“I want to sign you,” Crosse said.
“Not your goons. Come, sit.

“I like your voice.” He
slipped a contract into her
hands. “G’won. Read it, kid.”

“I do fine here. Thanks.”

“Don’cha wanna be a star?”

“I do fine. Thank you.”

“Don’cha wanna at
least read it?” Crosse pressed her hard.
“Just what do you want?”

Slowly, her sultry,
Mediterranean eyes
turned frosty, cut deep.

She growled, “I want to
pull your legs off and see how
you crawl out of here.”

“Oh,” Crosse lamented.
“That’s no good a’tall. Pretty
face. Heart made of salt.”

“I’m getting bored with
you,” she said. “Speak. And then get
out. Fast.” She meant it.

“Well, all right, sister;
the deal’s off.” He plucked up his
hat, walked to the door.

“Just one more thing: Did
you kill Eddie Pierce?” She stood
tall, poised like a cobra.

“You’re not a cop. So
let me give you some advice,
here, Mr... Mr...?”

“Crosse. Allen Crosse. Rhymes
with ‘boss.’ I own two clubs in –”
“Mr. Crosse,” she said.

“People who ask too
many questions wind up very
dead,” she said. “Good-bye.”

Crosse laughed. “You’re funny,
sister, that’s what you are. A
real comedian.

“If you ever want
to dust out of this clip joint...”
Hat tipped, he ducked out.

Outside, he sighed. “Too
much of a face like that is
bad on the liver.”

Behind, bronze on the
lit marquee: *Kailani Knieht*.
Beyond: static night.

A shadow streaked past.
Crosse stopped cold. A splash. Footfall?
Faint whiff of menthol...

★

Pierce was a lawyer,
Gwen said. A real tiger shark.
Feared. Hated. Well fed.

Crosse decided to
snoop his office. Park Harbor
Court. Pristine. Filthy.

A couple of small beat
cops stood out front. Buoys on
a calm, black ocean.

He went in the back.
Alarms only trip, he smirked,
on clumsy fingers.

The cops went over
the place but good. Crosse was sure
they weren’t first in line.

He poured himself a
stiff hooker of Pierce's brandy.
Then he set to work.

He worked in darkness.
Blue clouds shrouded the moon. "At
least there's that," Crosse mused.

Papers, heaped in a
riotous splendor. Broken
lamps. Torn chair cushions.

Three hours later
he was sure of one thing: this
mess could use a fire.

Somebody wanted
something. Did they get it? Or
might it still get them?

Might have been about
a box job. Safe in the desk
was cracked, clean and cleaned.

He tried the phone. Still
worked. "Operator? KLondike
5309, toot.

"Yeah, Gwen? It's Crosse. I'm
coming over. Ten minutes.
Put the coffee on."

★

"Nice digs. Real cozy."
The fire whicker-snapped and roared.
The coffee was Greek.

"You really think it
was her?" Gwen was an eager
specter. "She killed him?"

“Kailani? Maybe,”
Crosse said. “But those eyes could make
a man kill himself.”

“Did Eddie like his
business partners? Did they like
him?” Gwen’s eyes went cold.

“I don’t know what you
mean,” she said. “Everybody
loved Eddie. Truly.”

“Everybody but
you,” Crosse shot back. “We can
play this game all night.”

“Are you accusing –”
“I’m accusing everyone,”
Crosse spat. “It’s early.”

“There are only three
people I trust: Uncle Sam,
Honest Abe, and me.”

“You didn’t like your late
husband too much. Don’t bother
denying it, sweets.”

“Eddie and I had
problems,” Gwen said carefully.
“But I cared for him.”

“Sure, kid, sure. D.A.
will buy that.” Gwen bit her thumb,
looked up-from-under.

Crosse got up, threw his
coat over his arm, made for
the door. “Lots of luck.”

“No, Mr. Crosse, wait!”
Gwen pleaded. “Whatever you
say... I’ll do it. Please.”

“I say: you don’t seem
too distraught over the death
of your rich husband.

“And that torcher! She
has some serious mob ties –
or thinks that she does.

“She didn’t even read
the phony contract that I
put into her hands.

“Any other dame
would’ve sold her kidney for a
better paying gig.

“A dead man, an icy-
hot widow, an office like
the town dump. And her.

“This whole mess stinks like –”
“Please,” Gwen sobbed. “Just name your price.”
“A lead,” Crosse implored.

“Level with me. It’s
the only way I can save
you from the hot seat.

“Give me something that
I can use.” Gwen’s brow furrowed.
“There was a man. Fat.

“Fat and bald and he
wore a white fedora. He
just stopped by last week.

“He – they – fought. In the
parlor. I heard through the door.
Emma heard them, too.

“Who’s Emma,” Crosse asked.
“Emma – Mrs. Pemberly –
she’s our housekeeper.

“She’d never repeat
it – unless I asked her to.
She’s a good egg, Em’.

“It was an awful
fight. Eddie kept saying, No.
He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t – he...

“And something about
insurance.” “Did you catch his
name?” Crosse’s blood was up.

Gwen thought back. “Lazlo.
A Mr. Ollie Lazlo.”
Then she turned to Crosse.

“Will you still take my
case, Mr. Crosse? Oh, I know
that I’m a handful.”

Crosse chuckled and drew
on his coat. “Lady, there ain’t
words for what you are.”

Gwen followed him out.
“I do hope that... that ‘contract’
wasn’t too much trouble.

“I mean, a thing like
that takes time! She didn’t even
look at it!” Crosse laughed.

“A cover letter
and five whole pages from last
year’s phone book – the nerve!

“No pleasing some dames.
Don’t bother calling a cab.
Night air helps me think.”

★

The front gate clicked shut.
The night air was damp, biting.
Street lamps sizzled. Popped. Rain.

Two blocks got a lot
of thinking done. The trees, Crosse
noted, looked like death.

High beams. Like the sun,
kicked, oil-slick, on the pavements.
Crosse quickened his pace.

The car behind him
sped up. Crosse cursed and ran. Rain
danced in the headlamps.

Fifth would soon be Main.
He'd never make it. He cut
down Victory Lane.

The boiler gurgled,
lurched. Hissed steam from its grille. Fogged
Crosse's secondhand spats.

Crosse made for sidewalk.
Flivver made him first – bumper
kissed his hip. He stopped.

Two gorillas in
overcoats dragged him inside.
“Hiya, pal,” one said.

“Rocco,” Crosse grimaced.
“Tony. Zookeeper forget
to lock up again?”

“Crackin' wise,” Rocco
said. “Shouldn't crack wise, Mista Crosse.
Not good fer yer healt'.

“We need ta have a
talk.” “No thanks,” Crosse replied. “I'm
allergic to lead.”

“Not that kind’a talk,”
shot Tony. “But it can be.
Let’s go get some eats.”

★

The diner was old.
The neon sign read, “Eats.” “They
weren’t kidding,” Crosse thought.

“Nothing familiar,”
he frowned. Out-of-business gas
pumps across the street.

His eyes lost focus.
He saw himself in the glass,
sitting in the booth.

On his left: Tony.
Across the table: Rocco.
On the jukebox: Glenn.

“We’re real sorry fer
hittin’ ya wit’ our boilah,
Mista Crosse. Honest.”

“Don’t sweat it, Rocco.
Your jack for my pie, and we’re
Jake.” Crosse’s hip was numb.

The dump was alive
with people – the late-night crowd.
Coffee. Greasy foods.

“Always crackin’ wise,”
Tony growled. “Gonna getcha
in trouble one day.”

Their waitress was a
kid. Ponytail and a cute
face. “Somethin’ ta drink?”

“Sure, girlie,” Rocco said. “Gimmie some coffee. Black.” Tony had the same.

“A slice of pecan pie. And a chocolate malt, too thick for a straw. Thanks.”

“Big hunger fer a guy in the soup,” Tony growled. “You’re paying,” Crosse shrugged.

“Awright, wise guy. Let’s have dis out.” “I know, I know,” Crosse sighed. “You look bad.

“I made you look bad to your boss. Like a couple of Neanderthals.”

“Right,” Tony said. “Sure,” Crosse continued. “Like a pair of dumb, stupid apes.”

“Sure,” Rocco grimaced. “Yeah,” Crosse smirked. “A couple of saps. Bums. Big, ugly – ”

“Enough!” Rocco slammed down his fist. The whole table jumped, rattled painfully.

“Crack wise one more time, it’ll be yer last, pal.” “Orders up!” their waitress squeaked.

Crosse began stuffing his face. Tony and Rocco stared, mutely seething.

“Lissen, Mista Crosse,” Rocco said. “Mebbie we got off on the wrong foot.”

“Yer an okey guy,
sure,” Rocco said. “Sure. Can’tcha
cut us a break, heah?”

“And stay away from
your boss.” Crosse pushed the side of
his fork into pie.

“We don’t woik fer her,
wise guy,” said Tony. “We woik
fer *him*.” Crosse looked up.

“Who, exactly, is
‘him?’” He rolled a smoke. Stares were
exchanged all around.

“Never you mind, wise
guy,” Rocco roared at Crosse. To
Tony, he said, “Clam.”

Through a thick, porcelain
curtain of smoke, Crosse said, “Sure,
I’ll stay away. Far.

“On one condition:
your boss’s name.” Rocco pleaded,
“Be reasonable.

“You dunno what’cher
gettin’ yerself into, heah,
Mista Crosse. Really.”

“Then enlighten me,”
Crosse said. “Or, next time, I bring
a box of chocolates.

“I’m sure Kailani
will like that.” “Our boss’ll bury
you in that box, you –”

“Well, Tony,” Crosse shot,
“back to this mysterious
‘boss’ again. His name...?”

Rocco scowled, rumbled at
Tony: “Dummy: Close yer head.”
Then, “Mista Crosse, please...

“Our boss... He’d have us
gashouse and grease ya, just fer
talkin’ to Ms. Knieht.

“Gasehousin’ we don’t
mind – comes wit’ da job. And we
enjoy our woik. (*Heh.*)

“But killin’ is... well,
killin’ is anudda’ ting.”
“Well,” Crosse laughed. “Conscience.

“A rare find in hoods
these days – err, sorry. Hatchet-
men. You ran me down.

“You ran me down with
that heap. Brought me here, to, what?
Feed me pecan pie.

“Oh, and warn me that
you’ll kill me – sorry, *he’ll* make
you kill me. For what?

“For talking to his
canary? Asking a lot
of questions? That’s fine.

“That’s swell. And I should
thank you boys, too. Your methods
were impeccable.

“Your conscience saved my
life. And nearly shattered my
hip. Thanks a million.”

“Don’t be sore, Mista
Crosse,” Rocco said. “Please. We didn’t
mean nothin’ by it.

“We wuz just tryin’
ta get’cher attention.” “Well,”
Crosse scoffed. “You got it.

“Hope you two didn’t go
too far out of your way to
get it,” he shouted.

“Not a’tall,” Rocco
smiled big. “Geez, Mista Crosse! We
hate killin’ people!”

“Yeah,” Tony put his
arm around Crosse. “Espesh’ly
little guys like you!”

II.

The Evening After

The next morning, Crosse's hip was a purple bulge. "To match my brain," he thought.

His day started late.
Those goons took him out for drinks after the diner.

Coffee. Toast. A poached egg. Red eyes in the mirror.
More coffee. More toast.

Crosse showered. Shaved. Dressed.
Took a walk downtown. The sky was still overcast.

He did some thinking in a phone booth. Rain streaked down the glass at random.

Ollie Lazlo didn't exist – not in the city directory. Hrm.

He thought of the sign in front of Pierce's office. "Pierce, Crane, & Ferro." Crane.

Crosse decided to tail Daniel Crane. Then, maybe, Ferro. Night was young.

Crane was in the book. Powers Way. A hike, but cabs cost money. Oh, well.

The closer he got, the prettier the houses.
Tudors. Federals.

Then Revivals, Greek and Gothic. Darkness fell on a new age: Gilded.

Beaux Arts. Queen Anne. A
Renaissance Revival. Stone
columns. Balusters.

Balconies barely
hinted at in the setting
twilight. Chimneys dreamt.

Streetlamps splashed golden
pavements. “Day started later
than I thought,” Crosse frowned.

The moon was making
an early night of it – raised
hell behind the clouds.

“Fifty-four Powers,”
Crosse whistled. “Just a hair bigger
than the Taj Mahal.”

He scaled the fence. Found
a tree he liked. Climbed it. Sat
for thirty minutes.

Feathery trees were
soaked. Lean. Brooding. Like vultures.
The sward: a black pool.

Ivy crawled across
century-old limestone. Cross-
stitched windowpanes glowed.

Crane was home, but not
in sight. Crosse tried for cozy
on the hard, wet bark.

He rolled a smoke. Drank
from his flask. Thought of those eyes –
like a goddess. Scorned.

“Gwen was quite a dish,
too,” he thought. “In more of an
‘ice queen’ kind of way.”

Flaxen hair. Raven
locks. His mind was miles from the
man in the window.

Glint of his fobbed paunch
caught Crosse's eye. He muttered a
curse. Took a long drag.

The man undressed. Did
the Lindy Hop. Disappeared.
Reappeared in robes.

Twenty-three skidoo.
Red lounging rags. Silk. Flowing.
Twenty-four skidoo.

"Found my man," Crosse smiled.
"Likes his records. And murder:
poor, old Lindy girl.

"Wonder if he killed
his office, too? And Pierce, to
make three? Sure looks gay."

The phonograph brayed
through a vented window. Brass
horns rolled down the lawn.

The man popped a cork
from a bottle. Champagne fizzled
out. Filled two glasses.

He held a bouquet
to his nose. Closed his eyes. Smiled.
Hopped. Hopped for the door.

Victorian French
swung wide. Then Crosse's guts fell out.
Enter: the bronze dame.

She glided into
the room like a panther. Sleek,
black dress. Eyes restless.

Crane took her shawl. Slipped
a full, sparkling glass into
her hand. Her eyes blazed.

A piece of brick hit
Crosse on the back of the head.
He reached back, reeling.

Blood on his fingers.
“Nice shot...” He grayed and fell. And
fell. Ugly and hard.

★

“Ya hadn’t ought’a hit
'im so hard. Ya might’a kilt'
'im.” Voice of a brute.

“He’s just a little
fella’, ain’t he?” Another
voice. Another brute.

“Only compared to
you.” Crosse opened his eyes. Sat
up. Laid back down, quick.

Still night. Still raining.
A Baroque candelabra
lit the room around.

“Take yer time, little
guy,” Tony said. “Don’t be in
such’a big hurry.”

“Ya took quite a spill,”
Rocco said. “Had us scared, pal.”
Crosse rubbed four places.

“Sounds like you were the
cause,” he growled. “Couldn’t you have just
shot me? Oh, my spleen.”

Rocco's palms. "Ms. Knieht – she told us you wuz peepin' from a tree, she did.

"Told us ta bean ya one. 'But good,' she says. We didn't wanna, Mista Crosse."

"Thank you, Rocco," Crosse winced. "And, as usual, all is forgiven. 'Pal.'"

"Oh, now, don't be sore, Mista Crosse. We woinedja ta stay clear'a Ms. Knieht."

"I wasn't tailing Knieht; I was tailing Dan Crane, you – " Crosse cut himself short.

He smelled her before he saw her. And his heart broke in his throat. In shards.

"Idiots," she bade.
"Get out." Tony and Rocco turned to hurt-faced sheep.

Without another word, they lumbered, sunken, through the door. Crosse sat up.

Kailani took three, sleek strides across the room. Her eyes never left Crosse.

"Why were you looking in that window?" The window behind her was arched.

None of the windows that Crosse had seen on Crane's house were arched. Crosse stood up.

He sat back down – hard.
The room around him: nicer
than the one at Crane’s.

The lonely couch that
sprawled around him was ensconced
in silken, crumpled gold.

Rich tapestries hung
on walls. Ornate crown moulding.
Lapis lazuli.

Oil paintings that
looked like originals. Van
Eyck’s. Da Vinci’s.

Bellini’s *Feast of
The Gods* cast a hazy, warm
glow about the place.

Crosse felt his eyes pulled
back to Kailani, in front
of the window.

Blue-bale lightning flashed,
outlined this temptress in the
tempest of the night.

“Why were you looking
in that window?” Her voice dropped.
She sauntered toward him.

“It’s Crane’s window,”
Crosse barked. “Why isn’t he the one
asking me questions?”

“Because he’s dead. What
a silly question, Allen!”
She laughed wickedly.

The news was like a
conch, braying to keep time with
his pounding eardrums.

Still, her laugh was no
less grating – or resounding –
than a carillon.

Conch and carillon
and a symphony choir,
in his aching bones.

“Did you kill him?” Crosse’s
face was stone. He didn’t want
to be read between laughs.

“What does it matter?
He died smiling.” She looked him
over like new shoes.

“You can, too, you know.”
No more distance between them.
No room left to breathe.

With supreme effort,
Crosse stood up again. Her face,
inches from his own.

“Come off it, sister.
That pussycat act isn’t...” Her
finger touched his lips.

“isn’t fooling... any...”
Her smile, closing in, meant to
replace her finger.

His heart bruised his ribs.
His brain built great, dark shrines to
this dusky goddess.

Her lips worked a dark
art against his own. Her teeth
flashed in wicked sneers.

Crosse was drowning.
When he broke for air, the room
around him warped. Changed.

Behind him towered a
massive limestone fireplace. On
its mantel loomed fangs.

Two full-bodied lions
fought over a classical
lyre, gilt and gleaming.

The rug below: a
hand-woven portrait: Pikes. Death.
Vlad Tepes' Forest.

He felt like his head
was spinning one way, his brain
spinning the other.

His eyes came to rest
on a bed. And what a grand,
awful thing it was.

The bed hangings were
glimmering misfortune. The
bed posts: black totems.

The sheets shimmered hot,
like golden witchfire. Like great,
burning waves of sin.

“Why did you... bring me
here?” Crosse mumbled. Kailani
bit his bottom lip.

“I like you. I like
the look of you,” she purred. “I’m
sick of fat, old fools.”

“What...?” Crosse began.
“You’ve figured it out by now,
detective. Surely.”

“Surely, you give me
too much credit,” Crosse gripped her
shoulders, pushed her back.

“You haven’t heard of him yet, but you will. Soon, big, and ten minutes too late.

“His name is LaBraun. I’m his girl. That is, I help him from time to time.

“In return, he gives me whatever I want.” She smiled. “Things. Places. People.”

“Sounds like you got it all,” Crosse said. “What do you want me for? A lapdog?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Kailani licked her lips. “Why, Allen, you’re blushing.

“Such a look on such a face! Why? Never been handled by someone like me?”

“Lady, until just last night, I didn’t even know they made ’em like you.”

“You’re funny, Allen,” she said, amused, “because you’re honest. Kiss me.”

He kissed her again, and, again, the room spun, a blurred wash of color.

Then he tore his mouth away from hers and socked her clean, hard, in the jaw.

It was enough to put her to sleep. He caught her limp form in his arms.

He laid her on the
golden divan. She stirred in
dreams, dark and nameless.

Crosse stood, heaving. Lost
in her figure. Detached from
life. Ustress. Terror.

Cold, dysplasiant
elation lasted for a
timeless interval.

“Every’ting okey
in dere, Ms. Knieht?” Tony’s voice.
Crosse snapped to, thought fast.

No way out. The room –
most lavish he had ever
seen – was closing in.

No other doors. No
other – Kailani’s window.
Crosse loosened his tie.

The latch did not struggle.
The arched pane of glass swung wide.
“Gee, thanks, Fate,” Crosse grumbled.

He wasn’t sure, but his
eye might’ve caught the doorknob turn,
as he leapt for shrubs.

Undergrowth didn’t much
break his fall, but it did its
best to rip and bruise.

When the rattling
in his ears stopped, he counted
arms and legs. Cat lives.

Above, a brutish
bellow: “Aw, no! Ms. Knieht! Speak
ta me! *Speak ta me!*”

Crosse fought clear of the
bushes and broke into a
mad but hobbling sprint.

Rocco stood in the
arched window, watching his pal
lope the twilit lawn.

★

Crosse cut through side yards
and backyards. Foreign street signs.
Bel. Crom. Sett. Hopeless.

Puddles splashed, coating
his calves in grimy, slick muck.
Cold sludge filled his shoes.

An off-duty cab
on Mitra. He spat red, flagged
it. Its light flipped on.

Crosse rolled into the
back before the driver could
see too much of him.

Eyes and freckles in
the rear view. Driver was just
a kid. "Where to, Mac?"

"Just drive." Crosse was a
dim sketch in the backseat. He
wished to remain so.

"Your dime." They motored.
The meter ran. Blue lightening.
Furtive eyes glanced back.

Crosse broke the silence.
"Take me to Fifth." The kid turned,
whistled. "Now there's a drive.

“Hope you didn’t leave your
wallet with your hat and coat.”
Kid tried hard for slick.

“I pay well, and I
don’t like questions,” Crosse croaked. “Drive.
Not too fast, either.”

“Nothing really fun
ever happens to me,” the
kid pouted loudly.

“My fares are boring,
un-talkative birds and bims
who ‘pay well’ for silence.”

Crosse was looking out
three windows at once for head-
lights. Moving shadows.

He replied through clenched
teeth: “Nothing wrong with silence;
great color, silence.”

“Sure, sure,” the kid said,
“for the sultan of Egypt.
For once, I want flash!”

The kid’s logic caught
Crosse on the chin. He shook it
off, incredulous.

“I want Pizzazz!” he
continued. “Zest! I want to...
chauffer Adventure!”

“Listen, kid,” Crosse said
and stopped. Headlights. Coming straight
at them. Slow and bright.

The kid didn’t make the
connection. “Lay it on me,
mister. I’m all ears.”

Crosse slunk down in his seat, as much as his tall frame would allow. Breath held.

“I said, ‘I’m all ears, mister!’” the kid happily chirped. “Just drive!” Crosse hissed.

The lights were almost on top of them. “Not nice to tease,” the kid pouted.

“Just once – just one time – I want to look back and see...”
The lights were blinding.

Just then, several things happened at once. Fate, they say, plays favorites.

Copper flash from a street lamp. Crosse. Mud. Blood. Eyes in the rear view widened.

The car beside them accelerated, spun in the street, tires squealing.

“Holy Moses! What a mug! You a pugilist, mister? Huh? Are you?”

“Listen, kid,” Crosse shot.
“A prizefighter,” the kid chirped,
“in my hack! Hot dog!”

“Listen, kid,” Crosse roared,
“I’m a detective. Flatfoot.
Private eye. Shamus.”

“No fooling?” the kid said, hopeful. His eyes went from tea cups to saucers.

“No fooling. And we’re
being tailed. No fooling.” The
car behind closed in.

The kid smiled brightly.
“Like in the movies? They out
to kill us, mister?”

“I dunno. Maybe.
Sorry to get you involved.
Now, step on it, kid!”

“Hot dog! Real killers!
Button men – with Tommy Guns
and... and everything?”

The car behind was
a pair of harsh, sickly white
headlights, pouring in.

“Yeah, Tommy Guns and
everything,” Crosse shouted. “Move!
Go! Gas it, kid! Now!”

“Sure thing, mister! I’ve
been waiting for something like
this my entire life!”

The cab roared to life,
like a thunderclap inside
an empty canyon.

Sleeping manors stirred;
their reflections rumbled awake
on shiny pavements.

The kid drove like a
demon, crushed out of hell and
not going back soon.

“My name’s Bill. Billy
Belmont. Actually, it’s
William Belmont.

“William Belmont,
Esq.” The streets became
tighter, more winding.

“But nobody calls
me that, though.” The car behind
fell back an inch. Two.

“Oh, yeah?” Crosse gripped
the door handle and his trick knee.
“What do they call you?”

“Dizzy – on account
of how hard I fall for the
ladies.” Dizzy grinned.

He seemed to steer
around a drifting trashcan
while looking at Crosse.

“Good to meet you, Diz’,”
Crosse nodded. “What do you say
we shake these guys, now?”

“Sure thing, mister,”
Dizzy said. Then, to himself,
“A real shamus! Wow.”

Both cars steamed through
murderous, black alleys that
towered like dark vaults.

Above: mauve-swollen
dawn and the promise of a
new day. Of escape.

Fish guts and debris
littered toothy, brick segues.
Cascading rainspouts.

Men covered in wet
newspapers took no notice.
Despondent, wrecked ghosts.

They burst out onto
a city street. Downtown? Crosse
wasn't sure. Still too dark.

The taxi burned through
vacant streets, lined with parked cars.
The heap behind gained.

They made a hard right,
down a new alley. "Meadow
Gold!" Dizzy cried out.

The tail end of a
milk truck backed slowly into
view. Crosse tensed up hard.

Dizzy punched it, made
it through with three inches of
rear bumper to spare.

A metallic shriek
behind. A sickening crunch.
A jarring silence.

A scene too still, too
suddenly. Unnerved Crosse, as
it ebbed in the dark.

★

"A real shamus! A
professional snoop! I could
be one of those! Sure!"

"You did okey, kid –
sorry – 'Dizzy.' Solidest
hackie I've ever –"

"I could be your side-
kick, maybe. Or, maybe, your
partner! Yeah, partner!"

“I’ll have to get some
business cards made up. ‘Dizzy
Belmont: Private Guy!’”

“Eyes!” Crosse fiercely cried.
“Private Eyes!” Dizzy smiled. “Eyes
on the road!” Crosse roared.

Metallic shriek, blue
sparks, screaming postman – Dizzy
side-swiped a mailbox.

“Why do you want to
be a snoop? Wouldn’t you miss the
hitting and running?”

★

Crosse reconsidered
dropped in on Gwen. They’d be
watching. She wasn’t safe.

He packed a suitcase
back at his apartment. Changed
suits. Ate five aspirin.

He had Dizzy drive
him downtown, to a pay phone.
“KLondike 530...”

“Gwen. It’s Crosse. Never-
mind why I sound like Death. Your
place isn’t safe. Calm down.

“They may be coming
soon; they may have been watching
the whole time. Calm down!

“I need you to pack
a bag. Grab some cash. Meet me
at the Royal Oakes.

“Yeah, hotel. Yeah, on
Broad Street. When? (When, when, when...) An
hour. No, don’t drive. Calm...

“Listen... Listen! I’m
sending a car. Be ready
to leave in fifteen.”

Crosse kicked the booth door
open, stepped out into the
dreary, gray morning.

“All right, Diz’: here’s five
for last night and five more for
Mrs. Pierce. Take it.”

Dizzy beamed from his
cab, “Wouldn’t make much sense to pay
your partner, would it?

“Would it, Mr... uh...
Geez, I’m dumb! I didn’t even
get your name last night!”

“It’s Crosse. But my friends
call me ‘Allen.’” Dizzy gaped,
smiling. Bounced a bit.

“Thanks, Mr. – I mean,
Allen! So, does this mean I
can be your partner?”

Crosse smirked knowingly.
“Maybe when that chin of yours
sprouts a few more hairs.”

He turned, pushed through the
bright, bleak drizzle that fell like gentle
icepicks over Main.

“Where you going now,
Allen?” Dizzy called after
him. “Morgue? Bar? Hoosegow?”

“Library, Diz’,” Crosse called back. “You’re never too old to learn something new.”

III.

The Lam
and
the Slaughter

A suitcase in the
library is a novel
thing. People notice.

Crosse held his tightly
to his side. Walked hard for the
periodicals.

He rifled through every
local paper. Prayed for freak,
horrible murder. Prayed...

Two librarians
shelved books nearby. One, ancient
and crooked. Absorbed.

The other was young,
curious. Studied Crosse through
black-rimmed spectacles.

“Man Dies in Gas Fire.”
“Man Dies in Strange Hacking Gaffe.”
“Man Dies, Dog Suspect.”

In every case, rich,
powerful businessmen. In
every case, badly dead.

In every case, an
“accident” that got pinned on
a wife. Colleague. Dog.

Crosse’s grumbling tickled the
younger librarian. She
smiled. Silently giggled.

Ambrose Bierce slipped through
supple fingers. FWAM! The ancient
librarian scowled.

A hunch. A big one.
If he was right, Kailani
was a murderer.

A mass murderer.
Or an accessory. The
perfect, perfect dame.

Thunder rattled Crosse. The
storm in his eyes cleared. Fate vied
to lighten the mood.

John Keats, leather-bound,
slid onto a shelf. Beside
Keats: shy, intense eyes.

Crosse winked. The voice that
went with the eyes yipped. Then both
were gone. Keats remained.

★

“I’ve been waiting for
you, Mr. Crosse.” Gwen stood, a
dozen bags in tow.

She was unnerved, yet
quietly dignified. A
swan, desperate for scraps.

The lobby of the
Royal Oakes was sad, vacant.
Just how Crosse liked it.

There were no tables or
chairs; only four or five plush,
circular couches.

An old, limping bell-
hop pressed a large “R” into
an ashtray. Nodded.

Crosse frowned, took Gwen by
the elbow and walked briskly
for the front desk.

“You did quite a job
packing. Hope you left the moth
balls in the closet.”

★

“Well. Here yar.” The old,
limping bellhop stood, hand out,
foot in the door. Grinned.

Crosse tipped big – and still
bigger to wipe their names
from his memory.

“You ain’t gotta pay
me nuthin’ fer that, mister.”
He laughed big, ghastly.

“Hell,” he called, hobbling
down the hall. “I plumb fergot
me own just last week!”

Crosse shook his head and
slung the “Do Not Disturb” sign
over the doorknob.

“I really think you
ought to tell me what’s going
on now, Mr. Crosse.”

Crosse paced. Cursed. Gwen stood
statuesque – her eyes, like a
portrait’s. Following.

He retorted, “I
really think you ought to sit.”
Gwen did so, tensed. Poised.

Crosse stopped, looked down. Gwen
watched his thoughts move around his
face like bad weather.

Finally, he spoke:
“She did it. She killed Eddie.”
Gwen blinked only once.

The blaze of ancient
winters – of frosty elseworlds
passed – flashed in her eyes.

Crosse didn’t know if the
look was one of cold mourning
or icy triumph.

He, no poet, as
most good detectives aren’t, chose
not to care too much.

Not to care that her
eyes were probably a mix
of both. Of vexed loss.

A lifetime spent with
a man in both love and hate.
Spiritual abuse.

Abuse that ended
with the swing of the headsman’s
axe. With Crosse’s terse words.

“Listen, Gwen, I –” “No
need to apologize,” Gwen
shot. “Please, continue.”

Crosse pulled a chair to
the edge of the bed, where Gwen
sat tall, unfettered.

He offered a smile.
When it didn’t take, he cleared his
throat and continued.

“Your late husband was
mixed up with the wrong people.
No doubt about it.

“Whether he knew it
or not – well, that’s another
question, entirely.”

“What does this mean?” she
asked. “Who was Eddie mixed up
with? What do they want?”

His question had turned
up the heat. She had begun
to melt, a hot mess.

“Why are they trying
to ruin my life? Why isn’t my
home safe anymore?”

Crosse stopped her cold, said,
“Let’s start with your first question.
Then work our way down.”

From an inside breast
pocket, he pulled handfuls of
newspapers tearings.

He handed them to
Gwen and recited without
looking, ““Man Dies in...

“‘Car Fire.’ ‘House Fire.’ ‘Bad
Fall.’ ‘Laudanum Overdose.’ ‘Self-
Shooting.’ ‘Fishing Gaffe.’”

His voice dropped a full,
dubious octave; again,
he said, ““Fishing Gaffe?””

Crosse watched her take the
news; watched her coolly page the
headlines in her hands.

“I’m afraid I don’t
understand any of this,
Mr. Crosse,” she said.

“These were lawyers, like
Eddie. Doctors. Dirty
politicians. Mobsters.

“A lot of mobsters.
Joey ‘Bravo.’ Tony Q.
Nicky Florentine.”

Gwen shook her head in
disbelief, “You really think
she’s capable of...?”

Crosse scoffed, “I think she’s
capable of ordering
the tides to shut down.

“That and a whole lot
more. Dame like her is nothing,
if not resourceful.”

“But how?” Gwen asked. “How
could she be behind all of
these? So many men...

“How could she have killed
so many men without being
noticed? Found out? Caught?”

Crosse took the tearings
back from Gwen. Pulled one without
looking. Held it up.

“Shocking what people
won’t notice when they’re paid to
look the other way.”

“What are you –?” Gwen said
and stopped. There, below Crosse’s thumb,
on Tony Q.’s arm...

“Kailani...” Her voice
was a husky whisper. Crosse
filed through the headlines.

He pointed out Knight
again and again. Stepping
out of limousines.

Dancing. Slung over
the arms of wealthy men like
exotic jewelry.

Always in the back-
ground, but never far behind
her victims. Those eyes.

Even in black and
white, they still burned fiercely, like
a stalking tiger's.

“She's in over half
of them,” Crosse said. His tone was
grave, funerary.

Gwen shivered and turned
away, dark scenarios
playing in her mind.

“She's connected,” Crosse
said. “At the very least, she's
an accessory.

“If my hunch is right,
she's got somebody behind
her. Somebody big.

“Bigger than this town
has ever seen. Big enough
to bribe, gag, strong-arm.

“Blow his way into
power, and, as for those who just
wouldn't fall into line...”

He tossed the pile of
newspaper tearings onto
the bed next to Gwen.

“They died smiling.” Crosse
looked out the window. Gwen stared
at nothing, forlorn.

★

The hard, gray streets bustled
with mid-morning life. Car horns.
Vendors. Hurried suits.

Snatches of men in
overcoats and fedoras,
dashing through the rain.

A languid trolley
glided down Main; its dinging
was brash, muffled yet harsh.

Gwen’s voice moved over
the back of Crosse’s neck like a
cold front, raising hairs.

“This all sounds like a
pretty big hunch, Mr. Crosse.
In fact, it almost...

“It almost sounds like
a conspiracy theory,”
she sneered. “Imagine!

“All of those men – all
of their deaths – related. Well,
even if they were...

“I’m afraid I didn’t
hire you to avenge their deaths,
or to save the town.

“I hired you to clear
my name.” Gwen’s voice told Crosse
that she was standing.

Adjusting her clothes
and handbag. She meant to put
herself back in charge.

He couldn't blame her. Tough
thing, finding out your world broke
ten minutes ago.

"You're the boss, lady,"
Crosse said without turning back.
"You pay my gas bill.

"Just wanted you to
know what we're up against. That's
all," he sighed. "That's all.

"But it is all tied
together. And that gives me
a big, fat springboard.

"Something to go off.
These people have done a lot
of big, nasty things.

"They've left a pretty
messy trail in their wake. If
I can prove that she...

"Well, if I can prove
anything – even one thing –
that might be enough.

"Enough to clear up
the whole mess – and save your sweet
neck in the process."

Crosse turned abruptly,
startling Gwen. "Wh-what are you –? I
mean, where –?" she stammered.

"Back to Eddie's old
office. There must be something
in that office. Something..."

“Something that we can
use. Some kind of evidence.
A recording. Files.

“Whatever Lazlo
was talking about that day,
in your parlor. Proof.

“Proof that we can use
against these people. Against
Knieht and her cohorts.

“Otherwise, why would
they bother framing you? Why
ransack that office?

“These are the kind of
people who have got dirty
cops on the payroll.

“They don’t need you
for a patsy. Why not just
blame another dog?

“Why?” Crosse gnashed his teeth.
“*Why?*” He picked up his hat and
coat, made for the door.

“Anyway, that’s where
I’m going. It’s a long shot.
It’s our only shot.”

Gwen looked ready to
spill, shook like she was freezing.
“And... what shall I do?”

“Wait for me, here,” Crosse
said. “I’ll be back before check out.
If I’m not, well... run.

“And keep on running.
And never look back.” Crosse stopped,
eyes full of sorrow.

“Gwen, there’s... there’s really
no easy way to say this:
these people won’t stop.

“They won’t stop coming,
unless we stop them. And they’re
very connected.

“And they don’t like loose
ends.” He took her shoulder. She
shook and shook, dough eyed.

“What I’m trying to
say is: you wouldn’t survive long
in prison.” Crosse turned.

Gwen panicked, ran to
his side, pulled at his lapels.
“Oh, please – let’s go now!

“Let’s leave to-night. I’ve
got money. I’ve got plenty
of money. We can go.

“We can live abroad –
in hotels four stars nicer
than this horrid place.

“We can go to Spain.
Prague. The French Riviera.”
She began to sob.

“There are hundreds of
places I’ve always wanted
to visit,” she wept.

“Places that Eddie
would never take me. Please,
let’s go, now, to-night!”

Crosse felt a twinge
of pity for her. She was
like an orphaned child.

A pretty, young thing
who earned everything she has
with her smile, he mused.

“Please,” she cried. “We can
live well – live lavishly – for
the rest of our lives!”

She pulled him closer.
“And you’ll protect me... won’t you,
Mr. Crosse?” Closer.

Her tears frosted the
tip of each ice-blonde eye-lash.
She blinked and blinked. “Please.”

“No,” Crosse said with grim
finality. He held Gwen
up by her shoulders.

“This is our one chance –
our only chance – at our old
lives. Eddie’s gone now.

“You can go when it’s
all through – go wherever you
want. You’ll be free, Gwen.

“You won’t need me or
Eddie or anyone else.”
He knew there was more.

Knew the real issue
was that she didn’t want to be
abandoned. Alone.

Crosse saw her greatest
fear written on her face. He
frowned, turned for the door.

“She’s quite beautiful,
isn’t she, Mr. Crosse?” He stopped,
hand twisting the knob.

“Sure,” he said. “If you
like staring into the heart
of a man-made sun.”

★

Crosse blew out of the
lobby. Heavy buckets poured
from the awning above.

Tires hissed like water
snakes through drowning streets. Pigeons
picked the sidewalks clean.

He tied the belt on
his overcoat. Popped the back
of his collar. Winced.

Pulled down the brim of
his hat and stuffed his hands in
his pockets. He walked.

The streets were busy
enough. No one looked to make
him – but no one would.

The last face he saw
might pass him, smiling. Might blast
from any boiler.

Might be the old man
tossing birdseed from his news-
stand, speaking Yiddish.

The walk was long, but
felt infinitely longer.
Like walking death row.

The only way to make
it through was to stay alert.
Calm. On edge. Composed.

He always hated
this part of the job – the eye
of the hurricane.

His blood was up. His
thoughts were strangling him. He would
have to pry them off.

He turned his mind to
greener pastures. Warmer climes.
Blonder ambitions.

Gwen's offer was... well,
Gwen's offer was straight. But truth
can be subjective.

Women have a way
of selling themselves out of
the tightest corners.

Honest dames. Town seemed
to be full of them. Ms. Knieht
sure made with the truth.

He didn't tell Gwen what
Kailani told him about
the mighty LaBraun.

He didn't know what to
make of it himself. It might
just be funtheroo.

Or it might be the
kind of confession honest
cops ask Santa for.

Beautiful women,
Crosse wryly mused, never fear the
naked truth. Never.

Kailani Knieht. She
could run a priest through with her
horns; he'd die smiling.

That was the offer
she extended to Crosse. He,
keen on life, declined.

He half kicked himself
now for turning her down.
He could still taste her.

The thought of her lips
hurt. Like only the best and
worst parts of life can.

Yet, they also warmed
him, spurred him on, despite all
sub-vocal protests.

He felt inspired,
drunk with possibilities.
He walked, tall and fast.

The thought of her lips.
The way she cooed through her teeth.
Her dark, spiteful smiles.

The thought of her lips
was like getting soused beside
a big, roaring fire.

By the time he reached
Pierce, Crane, & Ferro, he swooned,
plied with bronze “what if’s?”

★

Eddie’s old office
was in sight – but so were two
mugs in a black car.

They sat across the
street. One alert. The other
reading the funnies.

Bulls? Strong-arm men? Or something worse. "Some things," Crosse thought, "should stay mysteries."

Police rope was still in place. No movement within. No movement without.

Crosse cut around, through the back lots of three buildings and a tight alley.

He went in the back again. He smirked, again, at the fancy alarm.

Place was still the great and depressing aftermath of a small train wreck.

Crosse sighed hard. He was familiar with this rubble. He had named each pile.

He was overcome with hopelessness in the task: sifting through the scoured.

Still, the sun was up there, somewhere. Gray, afternoon light spilled through the blinds.

He set to work. And, again, he started with Pierce's fine cherry wood bar.

★

Gray turned to silver. Silver turned hoary. Shadows crept long. Scotch ran low.

Crosse sat hunched on a
coffee table, head on his
fist, tongue in his cheek.

His keen eyes darted
around the room like a snake's,
casing every nook.

Every wall. Window.
Window frame. Door. Door frame. Framed
plaque. Floorboard. Mouse hole.

Trash can. Closet. Torn
carpet. Crooked lampshade. Leafed-
through planner. Plant vase.

And nothing. Nothing
in the broken chair legs. The
crown mouldings. The busts.

Nothing in the mauled
cushions. Nothing in Pierce's desk.
Crane's desk. Ferro's desk.

Nothing in the sconces,
except soot. Nothing in the
files except the law.

And definitely,
definitely nothing in
the teak liquor case.

Crosse readjusted,
all ten fingertips on his
forehead. He sighed hard.

He cursed his eyes. Cursed
his luck. Fate. Gwen. Kailani.
All of womankind.

He took stock of what
he knew: he knew he was dead
without any proof.

He knew that, for as
messy as this office was,
it was squeaky clean.

He doubted Crane as
much as Pierce. He didn't know what
to make of Ferro.

He knew he had searched
all day and hadn't slept last night.
He ached all over.

His eyes burned. A dozen
places throbbed. Pierce's brandy helped.
But only so much.

Ollie Lazlo didn't
exist – not in the office
directory. Hell.

Crosse stood. Paced wide, through
pathways that ran like a maze
through broken clutter.

Found himself at a
dead end. Pierce's chair. He turned, flopped
backwards. Sighed again.

He put his palms to
his eyes. Outside, night fell. The
rain wasn't letting up.

He pictured the ways
LaBraun would break him, after
Kailani was through.

A dark rumble jarred him.
His hands slipped from his eyes.
A magnifying glass.

Victorian eye
glasses, folded into a
magnifying glass.

Pierce – or someone – had
left them hooked over an
Art Deco stenograph.

Through them, Crosse saw a
peculiar sight: a brick. A
slightly crooked brick.

He reached across the
desk. Carefully took up the
small, filigree handle.

Stood with purpose. Looked
closer. Followed this warped clue
to its closure point.

There, in the mantel.
Beneath a gothic cornice.
Kissed to the right – just.

Crosse held the glasses
inches away. The brick came
into sharp focus.

He put the handle in
his mouth and wrenched it clean from
the wall. A black box.

His heart bruised his rib
cage. He took the box in his
hands. Peeled back the lid.

Inside: a thick file.
Accounts. Earnings. The makings
of false tax returns.

Racketeering and
extortion. Gambling and drug
trafficking. Grand theft.

Burglary. Arson.
Bribery of a public
official. Murder.

So. Pierce was dirty
after all. A mob lawyer
and a bookkeeper.

“The latter,” Crosse thought,
“is what got him killed. And killed.
And, oh, what a death.”

He thought of Knieht. Saw
her swatting Pierce like a bug.
Like an afterthought.

He shook his eyes back
into focus. Flipped through the
thick file. A good read.

“LaBraun certainly
has some colorful names on
the payroll,” he thought.

Sal the Butcher. Lou
Vicks. Vinnie “Two Shoes” Malloy.
Joe “Gats.” “Just” Benny.

Obviously, this
was what Lazlo and Pierce were
running gums about.

Crosse wondered if Gwen
knew. He wondered how she couldn’t.
She was born with ears.

Lady had big eyes
and a brain to match. A great,
big female-sized brain.

Twice as big as a
man’s because they use it
for more than one thing.

“Gwen had to use hers,”
Crosse mulled, “to piece at least part
of this together.”

She heard them that day,
in the parlor. Going on
about evidence.

Lazlo probably
told Pierce the jig was up. Time
to give up the goods.

LaBraun was wise, and
that meant that Pierce was going
to cook with his books.

“That’s what a fella’
gets for trying to keep things
organized,” Crosse thought.

“Eddie took out some
insurance against LaBraun.
LaBraun took him out.”

Crosse wasn’t sure if
LaBraun was really dumb or
really that big-time.

He obviously
didn’t grasp the meaning behind
the word, “insurance.”

Pierce and his pretty
wife and all the things she knew
and would never tell.

Crosse imagined Pierce
had emerged from that room a
gaunt, fire-breathing wreck.

Who better to vent
to than a wife with nothing
signed in her own name?

Unless, of course, he
actually cared for her.
Novel idea.

“In that event, Pierce would’ve had to lie like hell,” Crosse nodded, lost in thought.

“That would explain the emotional cold front. The distance between them.”

Crosse considered his options. The way he saw it, he only had one.

Call in the fuzz. The only problem was: LaBraun had people inside.

Had to have people inside. Killers with badges. Good, honest, bad cops.

“Pierce’s files,” Crosse scowled, “didn’t do a good job putting names with vocations.”

Walking into the police department would be a headline massacre.

Crosse stared at LaBraun on paper. First impression. Intimidating.

He thought and thought. He stood, resolved. Closed his eyes. Pushed aside all logic.

He leapt back to Pierce’s desk and wrenched the phone from its hook. “Operator?”

“Gimmie the police.” Ten forevers later, he heard a gruff, “Stabler.”

Crosse forced his voice calm.

“May I please be connected
with Captain Ryan?”

Hours went by. Days turned
to weeks. Glaciers passed through. Cold.
Slow. Crosse rolled a smoke.

Finally, he heard
a big voice, full of Irish,
shout, “Ye got Ryan.”

“Johnny. This is Crosse.
Tricks?” Crosse offered a mirthless
laugh. “Oh, Johnny.

“Someday, when we have
world enough and time, I’ll tell
you all about her.

“Listen, John,” Crosse said
hesitantly. “I’ve something
you might like to see.”

He weighed the thick file
in his hand. “No, I can’t say
too much on the horn.

“Round up the poor cops.
Yeah, the ‘Trustworthies.’ Yeah. It’s
that big.” Crosse dragged deep.

“Thirty minutes. All
right, Johnny Pal. See you then.”
Crosse hung up the phone.

He smiled to himself.
Recalled the wayward daughter
he brought home for John.

Prodigal case. Paid
well. The good captain’s favor
was a healthy perk.

Crosse blew a kiss to
Fate. Thanked Ol' Sherlock with a
shake of the glasses.

Put on his hat. Slung
his coat over his arm. Tucked
the file to his chest.

He raced to the bar,
grabbed a large decanter, and
pressed it to his lips.

He swigged a profane
mouthful of Scotch. Then
he made for the door.

★

The streets were flooding
nicely. Crosse's shoes were drowning.
The night air was crisp.

Crisp and dark and one
big, hot scream too quiet. The
world slept anyway.

Getting past the mugs
who sat in front of Pierce's old
office was easy.

Knowing when and where
the next set of mugs would come
from was the real trick.

The sky was cruel, pitch.
Unrelenting. Pearls of dark
purple swam through clouds.

Crosse kept a swift pace,
file tucked inside his coat, pinned
tightly to his chest.

The gloom around him
seemed to crawl at him. Taunt him.
Promise his death. Soon.

Shadows threatened to
spring alive. Trees seemed to fish
with their long, gnarled claws.

Crosse's last cigarette
ran low. He tossed it into
a gutter. Exhaled.

The walk from Pierce, Crane,
& Ferro to the police
department wore on.

It quickly became
the longest walk of Crosse's life.
Too much dark nothing.

In reply to an
unsent prayer, headlights chased
off the murky night.

Crosse kept up his pace.
If the lights passed by, he swore,
he'd go back to church.

The black flivver pulled
up next to him. "Don't make this
hard," a voice issued.

Smart play, waiting for
him to cross the 39th
Street bridge. No escape.

Undulating smoke
rose like a thin, restless snake
from the dark window.

Menthol. Same taste as
the Saxton Club. Crosse would bet –
A gun cocked. "*Get in.*"

Crosse didn't see who said
it. Didn't see who was in the
car. He ran like hell.

Madly sprinting through
the night, blood pounding in his
ears, he barely heard.

Barely heard the gun
shots, the bullets zing past his
ears, the men shouting.

Some laughing. One was
all business. "Don't foul this up!
You miss, and we're dead!"

The car was on his
heels, weaving drunkenly. A
shark, playing with food.

The end of the bridge
was miles away and farther
with every hot step.

There was no escape.
"Not this time," Crosse's brain screamed. "Time
to cash in my checks."

Still, he ran, as if
compelled to, through the dwindling
sands of an hourglass.

"Squirt metal, you mugs!
Kill 'im! *Kill 'im!*" Something hot
sliced through his hip.

Crosse roared. Whatever
grim circumstance would make of
him, he would not quit.

A metallic shriek
behind. A sickening crunch.
A car full of screams.

The boiler on his
heels veered off, into a
ditch. Crosse didn't slow down.

A flash of yellow
on his left. He didn't look. A
young voice, too happy.

"Where to, Allen?" Dear,
old, sweet, old Dizzy. Crosse dove
in, through the window.

"Wowie! Nobody
has ever gotten in my
hack like that before!

"And most gees prefer
the backseat!" Crosse struggled to a
sitting position.

"Drive!" He howled "Police
station! I hafta... hafta
check... check on something..."

Crosse felt himself gray
slightly. He hooked a thumb in
a belt loop and pulled.

Right hip. Three inches
down. He expected the worst.
What he saw was red.

Red and thin and long,
like a burn mark. Like a slug
that had grazed his skin.

Crosse laughed. He laughed and
laughed. Dizzy started laughing,
too. They laughed like fools.

"Say," Dizzy tittered,
"why are we laughing, Allen?"
Crosse wiped his eyes clear.

“Ha! My sentence got extended, Diz’. By, at least, another few hours.”

“Oh,” Dizzy said, brow clearly furrowed. He wagged his confusion away.

“You did real good back there, pal. Where the hell did you come from anyway?”

“Well,” Dizzy blushed, “you told me that I couldn’t be your partner. ’Least, not yet.

“Not with my baby-smooth alfogeos.” He frowned, cleared his throat. Looked down.

“But, well, I can still be your driver.” He smiled at Crosse, bright and hopeful.

Crosse grinned, “And you just happened to be in the –” “Yep! In the neighborhood!

“Well,” Dizzy paused. “First, I had to look into our old friend, Mrs. Pierce.

“I recognized her name – she was married to that lawyer what got killed.

“He was plastered all over the papers last week. Did you know, Allen?”

“Had an idea,” Crosse chuckled. “Please, continue.” “Well, I took a drive.”

“Just a little drive,
see? Up to Mr. Pierce’s old
office,” Dizzy smiled.

“Place was in the phone
book. Under ‘P.’ So, I drove
up and snooped a bit.”

“Oh,” Crosse’s eyebrows rose,
“you snooped a bit, did you?” “Sure,”
Dizzy said. “A bit.”

“Then, I saw these two
mugs in a car. Their windows
were cracked – for their smokes.

“I snuck up in the
bushes. Crouched a bit. Heard
what I heard,” he shrugged.

“And what did you hear?”
Crosse asked. Dizzy pursed his lips.
Eyes wide, he looked up.

“Well... they really don’t
like you too much, Allen.” “Who
does?” “I do!” “Go on.”

“They kept saying, ‘If
he finds it, he’ll come out with
it. And, if he don’t...’”

“Go on,” Crosse said. “If
I don’t...” “If he don’t, we blast
him any old way.”

Crosse’s stomach felt like
a block of ice. Cold sweat ran
in beads down his temples.

Dizzy went on. “So,
I ran to my hack. Waited for
you to show, Allen.

“But you never did.
Eventually, they got
bored. I thought they thought...

“Well, I thought that they
thought that, maybe, you gave them
the slip. They drove off.

“I figured they were
looking for you,” he shrugged big.
“So, I followed them.

“Did I do okey?”
Dizzy asked. “You aren’t mad at
me, are you, Allen?”

“You did swell, Diz’,” Crosse beamed,
“You came through aces.” Dizzy
smiled and bounced and smiled.

“Gee, thanks, Allen!” He
stopped. Looked down again. “But... I
did wreck that guy’s heap...”

“What you did was pure
talent, Diz’. Magic. You would
have done Merlin proud.”

★

“Police department,”
Dizzy said. “Aw, g’won; keep your
dough in your pocket.

“It’s no good in this cab,
anyhow.” Crosse got out. Stood
in the open door.

“Thank you, Dizzy.
For everything. Now, just do
me one, last favor.”

“Name it, boss!” Dizzy chirped. Crosse’s face went cold cement. “Get lost,” he ordered.

“If anything were to happen to you, well... I hate a mother’s tears.

“They don’t run off my back so easy. Savvy?” Crosse’s tone was sober. Kind.

“Sure, boss,” Dizzy said. “I understand.” “Good,” Crosse said. “Okey,” Dizzy said.

“So, I’ll be waiting right here for you, boss. Take your time; meter’s asleep.”

“This isn’t a game, Diz’. These people are out to kill me. Maybe you, too.”

“Sure, I knew that. A couple of mugs came down to the garage to-day.

“Tony and... Rocky, maybe? Yeah, they came in. Asked questions. Pushy cats.

“Nice, though. Wanted to know which cabbie had the plate scrawl, ‘483-somethin’.”

“What did you tell them?” Crosse slyly asked. Dizzy smiled deviously back.

“What else?” He said. “Hack was stolen, fellas. Filched from this very garage.

“‘Queer you should ask,’ I
said. “‘Do you know anything
about it,’ I said.

“They got real nervous-
like, offered to buy me a
drink. It was real cute.

“They asked me if I
knew anything else. I said,
‘Nothing from no one.

“‘Darndest thing. Sorry
I couldn’t be a bigger help.
Thems the breaks, I guess.

“‘I don’t drive ’em; I
just fix ’em.’” Dizzy finished,
smiling. Crosse stood. Stared.

His face cracked. He laughed.
Dizzy laughed, too. They both sort
of knew why. Sort of.

“Watch yourself, Dizzy,”
he said. “I’ll be out within
fifteen to twenty.”

Crosse turned, dashed across
the sidewalk, up the wide, lime-
stone steps to the doors.

An irrelevant
fossil sat at the front desk,
half napping, half dead.

“Say, gramps,” said Crosse. “Mind
telling Captain Ryan that
Allen Crosse is here?”

The old copper snapped
to, sputtering, “Huh? Wha’ja
say?” squinting to hear.

“Crosse, pops. Allen.
Just call Ryan. I’ve only
got one lifetime, see?”

“Ooo!” The old copper
stewed. “You kids and your newfangled,
jumbo-jive, slang-speak.”

He wrestled painfully
with the intercom. Shouted
into it, “Johnny!”

“Ooo!” He stewed. “Don’t you
tell me, boy! I’ll call you just
whatever I like!”

“I remember you
from when you used to play dice
down on 39th.”

“You in them short pants,
sneaking a smoke – what do I
want? *What do I want?*”

He squinted at Crosse.
“What do I want?” “Crosse, pops.” “Oh!”
The fossil croaked, “Crosse!”

“Hello? *Hello?* Ooo!”
He stewed. “He hung up. Well? What
are you waiting for?”

“Go on back, Mr.
‘One Life to Live.’ Captain’s
expecting you. (*Heh.*)”

On his way back, Crosse
heard the old copper scoff, “... kids
all think you’re hot stuff.”

Busy desk jobs buzzed
around him. Some sneered. Others
chided his status.

Crosse had to laugh. At
least his shoes had gum on them –
these guys hardly walked.

Fat, dumb cop after
fat, dumb cop. Answering a
phone. Eating a pen.

Looking at him like
they wanted to kill him. Or
eat him. Bunch of bums.

Crosse remembered why
he didn't like coming here.
Coffee was bad, too.

An attractive, red-
headed beat cop said "hello"
with her eyes. Crosse smiled.

On a not-so-life
threatening day, he would have
said "hello" right back.

He couldn't be sure she
wasn't LaBraun's inside man, as
it were. He'd lay odds.

Eight to five, based on
LaBraun's recent track record,
the mole was a dame.

LaBraun liked to kill
with beautiful women – not
fat, pen-eating cops.

He saw the door, marked,
"Ryan." The shades were drawn tight.
"Good," he thought. "All here."

He blew inside and
closed the door behind. Twelve men.
Only one smiling.

Captain Ryan stood
up from his desk, singing, “Crosse!
Ye old so and so.”

“Hello, Captain,” Crosse
said, shaking his hand. Ryan
laughed and shook harder.

“Can I get ye a
cup o’ scaldy, there, Allen?
Brant! Get Mr. Crosse –”

“No. No, need,” Crosse said.
“There’s... really not much time, I –”
“Boys! Say yer hellos!”

Murmured greetings
died in mid-utterance. “Stand
to, ye bums! Salute!

“This be the man who
brought me Susie home to me
when none’a ye could.

“Too busy runnin’
around with yer thumbs
in yer –” “Captain!”

“I’m sorry, Allen, I’m
sorry. Bunch o’ bums. I should
have ’em all flogged.

“Anyway,” Ryan
cleared his throat. “Here they are: the
best cops on the force.

“Cream of the sour crop,”
he finished. Crosse walked into
the room. Stopped. Perused.

He looked on Ryan’s
men with stoic eyes. At last,
he nodded, content.

“Quite a brute squad, here,
Captain,” Crosse said, impressed. “But
can they whistle Dixie?”

“Sure,” Ryan said. “They’ll
whistle a whopper and kick straight
a crooked man’s teeth.

“What’s this all about,
Allen?” Crosse dropped the file on
Ryan’s desk. “LaBraun.”

Crosse repeated more
loudly, “LaBraun. The Kingpin.
Big shot. Killer. Thug.

“Biggest thing this town
has never seen. Anyone
here heard of him?”

Dark exchanges washed
around the room. “Jaysus...” A
coarse whisper behind.

Crosse turned. Ryan held
the file in his hands at his
desk. He looked pale. Ill.

“Can it really all
be true, then? I mean... it’s like
findin’ out St. Nick –”

“He’s real,” Crosse said. “And
he’s really got some pull in
this town. This office.”

Every pair of eyes
in the room itched at Crosse’s words.
Turned somewhat hateful.

“I can’t take this no
more, Capt’n.” A wiry, young cop
went off like a gun.

“Flatfoot comes in here,
tellin’ us the boogeyman
is real, and we’re, what?”

“Supposed to track him
down and slap the cuffs on him?
On what charge, flattie?”

Another badge got
brave, shouted, “Hauntin’ every
closet in this town!”

The room went all laughs
and ribbing, until Ryan
slammed his fist, “Shaddup!”

“I heard o’ this mug
before this evenin’, I tell
ye that much. LaBraun...”

“Heard he owned some o’
me bosses. The mayor. The
chief. Half o’ the town.

“Heard maybe more. Who
knew? Who knows? I always kept
me mouth shut. Shut tight.

“Tighter’n a nun’s frock in
a creep joint full o’ devils.
Get me, boys? Savvy?”

He looked his men up
and down, like a father whose
children disgraced him.

“Ye want a charge?” He
growled, song in his voice plumbing
the lower octaves.

“Here’s the book ta pick
from.” He took a stiff backhand
to Pierce’s accouting.

His solemn eyes bore
theirs down as he looked around
the room. "S'what I thought."

Someone coughed. Ryan
turned back to Crosse. "Now I owe
you two, Detective."

"We'll call it even,"
Crosse said, "if your boys can give
me a lift someplace."

"Sure thing, Allen. Vicks!
Benny! Front and center, you
two! Chop chop, boyos!"

The spark of those names
lased the dynamite in the
annuls of Crosse's brain.

Lou Vicks. "Just" Benny.
Crosse dove without looking. "*John!*
DOWN!" BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!
BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!
BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

Crosse went deaf with the
sudden, rapid onslaught of
gunfire. Didn't notice.

He laid on top of
Ryan on the floor, behind
the desk. With the file.

Shouts of "Get them!" turned
to shrieks of "My leg!" "My hip!"
"My God, I'm dying!"

The fight seemed to last
forever. Ryan's mouth was
moving. Crosse read lips.

“Now I owe you three.”
Crosse’s eyes said just how sorry
he was. Ryan smiled.

He put the file in
Crosse’s hands and tucked his fingers
around it tightly.

Pulled his colt from his
sock. Winked at Crosse. Mouthed one more
word. “Go.” Pushed Crosse up.

Ryan was on his
feet and blasting before Crosse
could protest. Could move.

The office was a
mess of blood and death. Slimy,
red and yellow death.

Crosse didn’t think. He ran.
He ran through the bullpen and
ran past the front desk.

He took the wide, lime-
stone steps, two at a time.
He ran through the rain.

He ran to the idling cab
and wrenched open the door. Jumped
in. Sat, mutely stunned.

Shock wrapped around his
throat. Heart. Brain. Like a snake. Wrapped
and squeezed like a snake.

“We ready to go,
boss?” Dizzy bounced. “We all through,
here?” Crosse said nothing.

“Say, you okey, boss?
You don’t look so hot.” “Drive,”
Crosse said. “Hotel. Now.”

“Okey, boss, okey.
Be there in half a shake... Say:
Is that... blood, Allen?”

Dizzy’s eyes emptied
in the rearview. Turned spectral.
Crosse slapped his own face.

Shook his head like he
was trying to sober up.
“Shock... seting in now...”

“It’s okey, boss, I
swear, it’s okey,” Dizzy’s eyes
pleaded back to him.

“I’ll get you there – get
you to Mrs. Pierce – and real soon,
too!” Dizzy floored it.

Crosse rolled his head back
against the cool leather seat.
He swallowed. Looked up.

His eyes leapt over
tall buildings, like when he was
a kid. The sky loomed.

Threatened to fall at
any moment, like the roof
of hell. Fall and fall.

Neon lights streaked past
his glassy and staring eyes.
Streaked to nothing. Ghosts.

His head lulled in the
speckled window. Eyes threatened to
drift and not come back.

★

He was a fool. A
fool for underrating this
juggernaut. Madman.

Genius. LaBraun didn't
get to where he is on the
backs of dames, alone.

Crosse punched his thigh. Gnashed
his teeth. He thought of Johnny.
Smiling. Blasting. Dead.

"Faster, Diz'." He wasn't
even aware he said it.
Wasn't even aware.

He didn't know what he
would say or do next. Just run.
Just grab Gwen and run.

"We're here," Dizzy called.
"Allen, do you need me to –"
"Stay here," Crosse ordered.

"Keep it running. We'll
be right down." Crosse kicked open
the door. Leapt, running.

He tore inside the
building. Past the old, limping
bellhop. Past front desk.

He made the stairwell.
Up the stairs, three at a time.
Down the long, long hall.

Jammed a key into
a lock. Smashed into the room.
Gwen screamed when she saw.

"A-Allen? My God!
Your clothes! What... what happ –" "No time,"
Crosse said. "Grab your stuff."

“Better yet: we’ll buy
it all new, in some of those
fine countries of yours.”

“What –?” “The places! The
places Eddie would never
take you! Let’s go now!

“To-night!” Crosse grabbed her
wrist and pulled for the door. “Let’s
leave and never, ev –”

The sound of a small
army trooping down the hall
froze Crosse mid-stride.

Men shouting orders.
The overwhelming smell of
gun oil. More shouting.

Crosse turned back slowly.
“I’m sorry, Gwen. I’m so, so
sorry.” Her eyes knew.

Saw death in his own,
and assumed the worst. Chin up,
she said, “It’s all right.”

“You tried your hardest,
and I don’t blame –” The door
burst. Gwen screamed again.

A chopper squad filed
into the room and fell in
line. Six feet from Crosse.

IV.

We, Who Are About
to Die

“Salute, you bums! Snap
to! Look at you, all cute
in your line. Real tough.

“Like a regular
prison lineup. And who’s in
our little lineup?”

“Peter ‘Gabs.’ Michael
Tucci. Al Biggs. ‘Fat’ Jamesie.
Joey from Fresno.

“I’ve always meant to
ask you, Joey: is ‘from’ your
middle name?” Crosse laughed.

None of the men in
the lineup laughed. Moved. Blinkered.
This made Crosse nervous.

The very fact that they
hadn’t yet cut him in half with
bullets made him nervous.

They were holding him
and Gwen. Waiting for something.
Someone. This was it.

They wanted the file.
As soon as they had it, he
and Gwen were grease spots.

“Easy, boys, easy!
Those triggers are sensitive!
And so is my skin.

“I hate to think of
the harsh cleansers they’d use to
scrub it off the walls.”

“How can you laugh,” Gwen
asked in a breathless whisper,
“at a time like this?”

“Like this,” he said, and
bellowed in Biggs’ face. Humor
never touched Crosse’s eyes.

Biggs’ face never changed.
Neither did the others’.
Well-trained Rottweilers.

Crosse’s worst fear realized.
He was bulletproof, as long
as he had that file.

No matter how hard
he tried to goad them into
killing him, they wouldn’t.

He could stomp on their
feet. Spit in their faces. Speak
ill of their mothers.

Defile their daughters.
Reach for the piece he never
carried. Swear their deaths.

They would smash the butt
of a Tommy Gun into
his nose. Watch him bleed.

And nothing. And wait.
And he didn’t feel like bleeding
on his antique suit.

So he stood. And Gwen
stood. And they waited. And Crosse
tried vainly for death.

“Whew! What a week it’s
been, Mrs. Pierce. What a week,
indeed.” Crosse wryly chuckled.

“Meeting beautiful
women is a surreal thing
when you’re sleep deprived.”

Gwen smiled at the floor.
Crosse grinned at her listening
profile. Inhaled her.

“I love this job,” he
exhaled. “The people I meet!
This nutty, young kid...”

Crosse cut himself short.
He didn’t want to give Dizzy
away. He moved on.

“I’ve been hit by a
car, a brick, trees, shrubs – oh, and
the ground,” he grimaced.

“But, at least the rain
has softened that up a bit.”
Gwen’s snicker wasn’t forced.

“I was shot (sort of).
I was shot at a bunch of
times. Saw two gunfights.

“Saw...” his mind turned, once
again, to John. Hurt? Dead? Face-
down in his own blood...

The thought slashed through his
gut like claws. He trailed off. Stared.
Mumbled an Irish Psalm.

★

Time dragged by like a
spider with one leg. Crosse sighed.
“Kailani’s spider...”

“What was that,” Gwen asked.
They had long since moved to the
bed. She sat ladylike.

Crosse didn't. Hands behind his head, legs stretched long, he perked up, "Oh. Nothing, dear.

"Nothing at all..." He screwed his eyes in tight on the mute pack of droppers.

"Aren't your arms getting sore? Last I checked, Tommy guns still weigh ten pounds, drained."

No one responded. Or took the starch out of their lips. Or dropped their arms.

"You know where I wish I was right now, Mr. Crosse?" Gwen's voice was low. Soft.

"Spring thaw was coming a bit late," Crosse thought. To Gwen, he said: "Where's that, sweets?"

"Hawaii." She laughed. "Why are you looking at me like that? I love the sun.

"I know I may not look it – I may not exude it, like Kailani..."

"But I do," she said. "And I tan very well." Crosse smiled. Smiled and listened.

"I was there once," she said. "On my honeymoon. Oh, Eddie looked the part.

"Long trunks and a pair of cheaters. He wore his robe on the beach," she laughed.

“Oh, you never met
Eddie. He was all right. He
was. Sometimes...” she trailed.

“No,” Crosse looked up at
her. “I never met him. I
can just see it, though.”

Outside, the wind and
rain pummeled the building, and
thunder severed the sky.

Still, it wasn't so loud
that Crosse could not hear
what was coming down the hall.

Footsteps. Slow. Even.
Like an entire army
walking on two feet.

He made one, last plea
for a quick death. To Jamesie,
he said, “Hey, fatso!”

Nothing. Crosse pressed him
desperately. “Yeah, I'm talking
to you, you tub of...”

Jamesie ground his teeth.
Crosse's heart leapt. He was ready
to see the next life.

“Wonder if I'll need
a new license,” his punchy
mind reeled. “*C'est la Mort.*”

The footsteps were close
and getting closer. And big.
Too big to be real.

He sneered brashly, “C'mon,
fatty! Where's our cigarettes
and blindfolds?” Footsteps.

Footsteps, outside the
door. Like a pregnant rhino's.
All heels and no bounce.

Cheap pinewood swung wide.
Enter: the mighty LaBraun.
Pinstripes on midnight.

Flat, black midnight
beneath a starless sky. Moon
of hell in his eyes.

His dark, inhuman
eyes. Something in them not right.
Never would be. Damned.

Damned and happy for
it and too big for any
devil to haul off.

Big like God. "The Old
Testament God, before the
big flood," Crosse thought. "Just."

He whistled in his mind.
He puckered and blew a sour
note, just to look tough.

LaBraun moved through the
room, too much man for too much
suit, towering Crosse.

He looked from Crosse to
Gwen. Put his big mitt to Gwen's
face. Thumb down her cheek.

"My file, Mr. Crosse. Or
I start breaking bones. Hers."
He stared, unblinking.

"What a way to ask,"
Crosse said casually. He
reached inside his coat.

Twelve machine guns cocked
at once. Crosse froze colder than
Gwen. She looked stone dead.

When his gutless thoughts
crawled back out again, he said,
“Had this nightmare once.

“Only, I was nude,
and you were five women,” he
nodded at LaBraun.

LaBraun did not smile.
He did not acknowledge Crosse
in any way. He stared.

Bored holes into Crosse
with his heavy gaze, hand held
out expectantly.

Crosse pulled the folder
slowly into view. Tossed it
into LaBraun’s paw.

“And you can choke on
it, gruesome,” he said. LaBraun
turned, made for a chair.

Found one across the
room. Pried the arms apart. Squeezed
himself between them.

Took off his bowler
and paged quietly through the
file. Lit a cigar.

“Quite a read, isn’t it,”
Crosse said to break the silence.
No one responded.

Finally, LaBraun
used his cigar to light Pierce’s
fine bookwork on fire.

Wisps of black smoke first.
Then it caught. Tiny flames grew.
Enveloped quickly.

Flickered luridly
in LaBraun's scarred, deeply-lined
face. His carved face.

★

Untold savagery
slept fitfully in his dark
eyes. His pitch black eyes.

Crosse shook in his soul,
but would never show it – all
he had, besides talk.

“So glad I could be
of service, Mr. LaBraun.
Good doing business.”

Gwen's brow furrowed as
delicate as a Chinese
lisp. “Business?” she said.

“Sure,” Crosse said, looking
fiercely at LaBraun.. “Business.
I'm not your snoop, Gwen.”

“You're... not?” If it was
possible, she grew paler.
Beyond porcelain.

“Sorry, sweets. I've been
in the employ of the big
man the entire time.”

Crosse laughed, “We sure put
one over, didn't we, boss? Didn't
we put one over?”

“You wanted the file.
I brought it to you – something
Lazlo couldn’t manage.

“Ollie Lazlo. He
was the ‘Menthol man,’ wasn’t he?
He was one of yours.

Crosse stared intensely
at LaBraun, and said, “You see,
Gwen, they couldn’t find it.

“Oh, they knew Eddie
had something big on them – dirt
to throw on their graves.

“LaBraun sniffed him out –
he really sees ’em like they
aren’t – isn’t that right, boss?

“He’s a smart boy, Gwen.
A real wise guy. Lazlo was
his bright idea.

“Biggest foul-job
on the East Coast, and LaBraun makes
him his go-to guy.

“He’s the one who’s been
tailing me. The one LaBraun
sent to warn Eddie.

“And he botched both jobs,”
Crosse jeered. “He couldn’t get Eddie
to give up the goods.

“And he couldn’t kill me
to save his life – which is what
LaBraun took from him.

“Isn’t that right, boss? Fail
you once, shame on you; fail you
twice, and get run through.

“I didn’t piece it ’til
to-night – there was one loogan
who kept shouting, scared...”

“It was back on the
39th Street Bridge. Every
other gee was giggles.

“Except for one – one
that was scared of a second
botch-job. Of you, boss.”

“Why... why do you keep
calling him, ‘boss,’” Gwen asked, like
a vanishing ghost.

“Because I work for
him – or should I say, because
he worked me?” Crosse turned.

“Right after he worked
you, sweets. He knew you’d need help
and wouldn’t call copper.

“Knew you’d be much too
scared to go to the police.
The perfect patsy.

“Worst scenario:
you would get the hot seat for
killing your husband.

“Best scenario:
you would still fry, but first you’d
bring in some chump sleuth.

“A real stooge, who’d find
that pesky evidence – find
it and burn with it.

“Because LaBraun doesn’t
like loose ends. I’m not part of
his gang – I’m no one.

“And no one would miss
me – least of all the police.
No one would get wise.

“LaBraun gets away with
it all. So, you see, sweets, I
worked for him after all.

“How is *that* for a
capper?” Crosse smiled at LaBraun,
exhausted. Impressed.

LaBraun seemed to be
patiently listening. The
file had long been ash.

“How far off was I,”
Crosse asked. “Not far,” LaBraun said,
flat and hard. “Tony,”

He called, “Rocco. Get
in here. Now.” Crosse tried to pry
the door with his eyes.

When he saw them, they
had the look of castrated
sheep. But they still smiled.

Smiled and snuck happy
glimpses of Crosse as they dragged
their eyes on the floor.

“Tony,” LaBraun said.
“Go stand by the foot of the
bed. Look at your friend.

Tony did. With his
back to LaBraun, he dared to
smile and mouth, “Hiya!”

“You were right, Mr.
Crosse: I don’t give third chances.
“Boys,” he said, “The heart.”

For the third time that evening, Crosse's head went white with noise. Grief-teary noise.

Chicago lightening filled the room. Gwen buried her head in Crosse's chest. Crosse watched.

Watched Tony's guts spill out of the front of his suit. The look on his face.

Amazement. Wonder. Frozen that way, he slumped to the bed, looking up.

Making eye contact with Crosse, though what he saw went far beyond Crosse's gaze.

★

"T-TONY? *TONY?* *NO!* *NO, TONY, NO!*" Rocco wept like a broken child.

"*NOOO!*" "Get him out of here," LaBraun ordered. The boys did. They dragged him out.

Dragged him and his large, flailing, ungraceful tantrum from sight. Closed the door.

"Well, Mr. Crosse. It now appears that it is down to the four of us."

"Yes." LaBraun urged. "Look at him for a while. He's not going anywhere."

Crosse could not pull his
eyes from Tony. Infantile.
Huge. Caught unaware.

Blood ran thick like red
midnight, pooled from his eyes
and nose and mouth and...

“Quite beautiful...” The
voice that spoke was eerie. Sick.
“Isn’t she, Mr. Crosse?”

Ten years might have passed
before Crosse finally said,
“Yeah. She really is.”

“I’m only going
to ask you once, and then I’m
going to kill you.

“The amount of pain
that you feel before your death
is negotiable.”

LaBraun stood. “Answer
well, and I’ll pop your head off
nice and quick,” he said.

“The longer you take,
the longer I twist before
I pull. Understand?”

“Ask away,” said Crosse.
No matter the question, he
knew he would crack wise.

For Tony. For Gwen.
For the hell of it. Because
he was not afraid.

He pried his eyes from
Tony’s and fixed them on the
LaBraun’s twisted lips.

“Did you really think
you were going to beat my
time?” His chuckle was big.

Heavy. Full of gut
and palpable hate. Crosse looked to
Gwen in his arms. Smiled.

He looked back up at
LaBraun, and said, “Before or
after pitching woo?”

LaBraun erupted
like a laughing volcano.
“Quick it is, then, Crosse.”

Before he took a
single step, a gun cocked the
room still and silent.

LaBraun was looking
at Gwen, unafraid. Crosse looked
to her terrified.

In her hand was a
small, silver colt. “Eddie gave
it to me,” she said.

“Just in case. He liked
insurance, Eddie did. ‘You
never know,’ he’d say.

“Smart man, my Eddie.
He knew; he saw you for just
what you are, LaBraun.

“You are a living
nightmare,” she said. “A disease.
A... a life-ruiner.

“And I’m not going
to jail or the gas chamber
or anyplace else.

“Not for you and not
for anybody,” she said.
“I will kill you first.”

“You think you can kill
me,” LaBraun huffed, cold as the
grave. “Take your best shot.”

“Gwen,” Crosse said, hoarsely.
“You don’t want this. This kind of
dirt does not wash off.”

“Give me the gun, Gwen.
Just... give me the gun, and we’ll
leave. Now. Together.”

“I’m giving you a
free shot, Mrs. Pierce,” LaBraun
said. “But only one.”

“Aim well. For the brain
or the heart, preferably.
Because, if you miss...”

“Give it to me, Gwen.
I won’t miss.” Crosse did his best
to sell his bold lie.

“That’s because he won’t
shoot,” LaBraun said. “But you will.
You would take my life.”

“You don’t want it,” Crosse
cried. “He’s not worth it, Gwen. Look
at me. Listen, please...”

“Mr. Crosse is a weak
man. Weak of stomach. Weak in
his heart,” LaBraun rebuked.

“He could not ever
understand what you’re feeling
right now, Mrs. Pierce.”

“The *hate*. You can taste it, can’t you? Like iron in your mouth. Like cold, dead dreams.

“It’s like a... spreading cancer, is it not? That’s the rarest kind of hate.”

“I’m glad the cancer metaphor works for you, you jingle-brained loon,” Crosse said.

Then he turned back to Gwen. “You’re no good with that gun, Gwen. And he’s too big.

“You don’t kill him on the first shot, and he’ll rip you apart the slow way.

“And he’s right: I don’t have the guts to watch. But he’d make me, just the same.

“This is our only chance, Gwen, don’t you see? Our last chance. Let’s go. Right now.

“Yes,” she said. “Our last chance.” Her eyes had already killed him. Could see him dead.

“This town wouldn’t exist without me,” LaBraun said. “Your tiny lives would crumble.

“I took the sky from Atlas long ago, just to lord it over you.

“What happens if I step away? Even if that bullet could drop me...

“What then? I’ll tell you
what: I’d get back up again
and kill you. Dead. *Dead*.”

“Your bullets can’t stop
me. Nothing can stop me. I
Am the Lord Your God.

“The sun rises and
sets with my say-so. You live
or die with my say – ”

Gunfire ripped through the
hallway outside – a screaming,
butchering maelstrom.

LaBraun leapt for Gwen.
Crosse did, too. Gwen leapt to her
feet, pumping metal.

She emptied five rounds
into LaBraun’s great barrel
chest. He slowed, faltered.

Turned to the growing
noise outside. “Smee, Crosse! Yer old
pal, Captain John! Ha!”

LaBraun stumbled and winced,
revolted. Crosse went giddy,
shouting, “*He’s in here!*”

LaBraun grunted and
made for the window. Ripped it
from its frame. Crushed out.

He plunged down the fire
escape like an ape into
the black pits of hell.

Crosse peeled the gun from
Gwen’s claw-like hands and took her
down by the shoulders.

Seconds later, the
door burst. Nine, shouting blue suits rushed
inside. “Crosse! *Allen!*”

And then Ryan was
on them, helping them up, and
Crosse was shouting wild.

“Keep her safe!” On his
way to the window, he weighed
the gun. One shot left.

★

The fire escape was
slippery, treacherous. Slick
with blood. Shook with fear.

It provided no
cover. The night below was
unknowably deep.

Crosse’s breathed the damp, stale
air in great, haggard gulps. He
led with Gwen’s small colt.

Swung it round like a
lantern and followed its warm,
reassuring glow.

The very night seemed
to gleam from its barrel – gleam
dark, caliginous.

The rain cascaded
from a thousand metal joints
and housings. Rainspouts.

He wiped his soaking
hair from his eyes and raced down,
down, forever down.

When, at long last, he
reached bottom, he descended
a short, steel ladder.

The alley reeked of
garbage. Three dead cops were dim
whispers in the dark.

Crosse knew they were dead
instantly – no human neck
could be so adroit.

Their eyes seemed to glow
in death. Diffused. Chatoyant.
Not ready to die.

Crosse looked up. Wheeled left.
Right. Up and down the alley.
The night stirred around.

Shifted in the rain
like a suspicious lover.
Everywhere something.

And nothing. Nothing.
Crosse tore off down the alley.
He drank in the night.

The alley, with its
high, black walls, led out to Broad
Street – a vast ocean.

Life. Cars and trucks. Horns.
Crashing against him in great,
tumultuous waves.

This town never knew
sleep. Sung of its sin in proud,
hot cacophony.

It swallowed LaBraun
whole. He could be anywhere.
Anywhere at all.

A dozen squad cars
and a paddy wagon sat
out front. And a cab.

Dizzy stood in the
rain, waving like a fool. “Boss!
Boss! Where’s Mrs. Pierce?”

Crosse bolted for the
cab. “I’ve been waiting for you,
boss! What have you been – ”

“Get in and drive! No
questions!” Crosse peeled wide the front,
passenger-side door.

“Sure thing, boss. Sure thing.”
They lurched off the curb and drove
into glossy noir.

★

Crosse didn’t know what he
was doing, or why he was
doing it. Didn’t know.

Wasn’t thinking. Couldn’t think.
The night was loud around him.
Screamed in his ears. Screamed.

No. Static from the
guns. Too many gun shots, too
close, for one lifetime.

He didn’t know where they
were going – didn’t know where his
man went. He couldn’t breathe.

“Boss...? Are you – ” “Did you
see the world’s biggest cat come
out of that alley?”

“The one I came out
of two seconds ago?” Crosse
blurted, insanely.

“Well... sure, boss. He was
big, I guess. Is that who we’re
following? Is it?”

“I... don’t know. I don’t...”
Crosse leaned forward and winced hard.
Felt his face flush hot.

If he could only
think. Only hear. LaBraun was
huge. Could’ve survived.

But she plugged him five
times. He had to be dead or
dying. Had to be.

Probably holed up
in a sewer someplace. Yeah.
Like a drowned rat. “Boss?”

Probably sucking
in his own blood with his last,
dying breath. Yeah. “Boss?”

Probably dying
like a pig in hell. Like –“Boss?”
“What is it, Dizzy?”

“I know where he went...
if you still want to know. I’m
headed there right now.

“Your call, boss.” Dizzy
fell silent. The engine hummed.
Wipers did their job.

“How do you know,” Crosse
rubbed his eyes. Voice was shopworn,
even by his standards.

“When he came out of
the alley, he ran right past
my cab – right past it.

“I thought, ‘Man, I hope
he doesn’t need a lift someplace.’
Turns out that he did.

“He ran right into
traffic and stopped some poor bim –
pulled her from her car.

“She asked him who he
thought he was. He shouted back,
‘I’m God,’ or something.

“Darndest thing I seen
all day – and you know how much
I seen to-day, boss.”

“So, how do you know
where he went,” Crosse sighed. Dizzy
chirped, “‘Blood on my seats!’”

“Oh – ! Sorry. I’m so
sorry, Diz’,” Crosse mumbled. Dizzy
chirped, “No, boss, no need.

“I’ve had lots of stuff
worse than blood on these seats. Washes
right off – easy fix.

“No,” Dizzy said. “I’m
talking about that lady
in the street – *her* seats.

“That’s what she yelled at
the big man. And he said back,
‘Shut yer yapper, bim.’

“Or something like it –
I don’t exactly recall.
But what he said next...

“I do recall that
with crystal clarity. He
said, ‘Need Buchanan.’

“I figured he was
talking about a croaker –
what with his bleeding.

“Buchanan’s not a
common name – I only know
of one in this town.

“And he’s as crooked
as they come – the kind of guy
who moonlights for mob.

“Yeah, my sister’s a
nurse, up at St. Helen’s – told
me all about him.

“He got pinched last year
for patching up bullet holes
under the table.

“Last I heard, he runs
an underground hospice, down
on the waterfront.

“I figure it’s worth
a look,” Dizzy shrugged. Crosse shook
his head. Shook and shook.

“When we get there, you
stay in the car. That head of
yours should be in school.

“Not getting blown off
in a butcher shop, down on
the wharf,” Crosse scolded.

“Sure, boss.” Dizzy said.
They drove the rest of the way
in screaming silence.

★

The wharf was empty.
Still. A filmy, gray mist. Somewhere, a foghorn moaned.

Seedy waterfront
bars, inns – dives of every kind –
brooded in the gloom.

Slumped drunkenly,
shoulder to shoulder, propping
one another up.

The light through their drawn
shades was dull. Cadmium. Like
cancer on yellow.

Thick planks thunked beneath
Crosse's heels. The dock was black with
water and long years.

Everything was dark,
swollen, and scarred, wrapped in Clove
Hitches with frayed rope.

Static ate the world
around him. The gun didn't feel
real in his tired hand.

Buchanan's shack was
in sight. "Left the light on for
me," Crosse thought. "How nice."

His walk was unchecked,
garrulous. The rain would hide
it. "My old pal, rain."

His humor didn't make
much sense anymore. Crosse didn't
much care. Not really.

He'd care again when
he saw LaBraun's body. Or
saw him checking out.

Or happened upon
the good doctor, slug fishing
and hand-stitching. Sure.

Sure, he'd stick Gwen's colt
in the big man's face for the
second time that night.

He'd yell copper and
sit and watch them squirm. Sure. He'd
wrap up before dawn.

He'd go home and he'd
eat a bottle of Aspirin. Then
he'd flop – and flop hard.

Sleep for three days. And
dream of bronze demons. And dream
of blonde angels. And –

Nothing. Nobody
in what looked like a waiting
room. Small. Dark. Barren.

Crosse kept his head low.
He crept around to the back
of the wood shanty.

Nothing. The shade was
drawn tight. The room glowed
dully. Could someone – ?

Crosse heard the sound just
before realizing what had
happened. Glass. Breaking.

A thousand, thousand
glinting, festive shards around
his head. Confetti.

His face seized up as
though bracing for a vicious
punch. A lucky thing.

Crosse never even
saw it coming – the hand that
plucked him up, childlike.

Pulled him inside, through
the window pane, broken like
a mouthful of teeth.

He soared ugly through
the air. Pummeled a wall with
his face. Then a fist.

Gwen's heater was ripped
from his hand. He was tossed to
the floor like refuse.

His mind swam in the
ether for a time. Might have
been days. Weeks. Years.

★

When his brain cleared at
last, he found himself lying
in a dank corner.

The room above him
looked like a torture chamber.
Rusty, metal things.

Instruments. Cold, steel
instruments. Scalpels. Forceps.
Syringes. Clamps. Scissors.

A dirty light bulb
swung overhead, splashed the room
like old bathwater.

Filament burned. A
bar of gold on a sunken
Spanish galley. Burned.

And below that speckled,
murky burning, LeBraun sat
on a steel table.

He was finished. Blood
trickled like water from the flute
of a marble satyr.

It plastered his white
undershirt and suspenders.
Thick and ropey.

“Just... waiting for Doc
Buchanan to patch me up.
Then, I’ll fix you, guy.”

Crosse knew he was just
bluffing. Knew he had to be.
Knew he couldn’t get up.

Couldn’t move one more inch
to save his very life. But,
then, neither could Crosse.

The wind and rain howled,
battered the house, ripped slats of
gray slate from the roof.

“Fate’s a funny guy.”
“Whoever said Fate’s a man?”
“A funny broad, then.

“Some things are bigger
than God,” LaBraun pondered. “Or
they think that they are.

“Fate’s one of ’em. (*Heh.*)
Tried... to beat me at every
turn. Even at birth.

“Tried to strangle me... with
my own umbilical cord.
Imagine,” he growled.

“Imagine what an...
artist... the world would have been
denied... Imagine...”

“You were great, all right,”
Crosse said. “But Nero you weren’t.
Nero painted things.

“Played a lyre. Burned Rome.
All you burned was some bookwork.
Still, you were okey...”

“For a ‘never was’
who almost made it famous,”
Crosse finished, smugly.

“All right, wise guy. You
just wait until Doc Buch – ” “Doc
ain’t gonna make it.”

Rocco’s voice. Harder
and grittier than Crosse had
ever heard it. Raw.

The door squeaked wide. Pitch
spilled like entrails across the
threshold. Rocco stood.

In his hands, he gripped
a shiny, new baseball bat.
His knuckles were white.

He walked toward LaBraun
with a heart full of hate. Of
vengeance beyond care.

No other walk is
the same. “I just lost my best
friend,” he said, flatly.

LeBraun sat with an
elbow on one meaty knee.
Paw on the other.

He spat, thick and red,
on the floor. Looked up. A long,
unreadable stare.

“How’s that feel?” His voice
was gruff. Thick. Full of blood. His
eyes were black. Soulless.

“I’ll tell ya about
it sometime.” Rocco swung the
bat. He swung and swung.

The heavy shadow
of his swinging form fell long
on Crosse’s shrieking eyes.

Each flat, meat-packing
thud crashed against his soul, in
great, thunderous waves.

Rocco swung and swung.
Six hours later, LaBraun was
dead. The sun still rose.

V.

Swan Song

“So I’m free, then? I
really am free?” The words came
hopeful. Youthful. Keen.

Crosse had to laugh. Had
to roll back on Gwen’s chartreuse
divan and let loose.

She was too cute to
let off the hook. He had to
torture her a bit.

Just a bit. Just to
the point where she flushed and said,
“You’re laughing at me.”

Of course, he denied it.
“No, I’m not, sweetness; I would
never dream of it.

“No, I’m laughing at
my frustration. I don’t know
how else to say it.

“LeBraun’s dead. His gang
fell apart shortly after
he died. They’ll all fry.

“They were carrying
automatic weapons in
that two-bit hotel.

“They killed one of their
own and half a dozen cops –
they will all get life.

“Some will get death – the
ones they can trace the bullets
back to, anyway.

“Johnny lost some good
men that night – cops that he came
up with since the beat.

“Papers are calling
it, ‘The Royal Massacre.’
Catchy name for it...”

Gwen saw last week in
the lines on Crosse’s face – lines her
questions had etched deep.

“I’m sorry,” she said.
“I know that I’m a handful,
Mr. Crosse, it’s just – ”

“Allen,” Crosse said. “My
friends...” His softened his voice, “My
friends call me ‘Allen.’”

“Allen,” she said and
flushed a deeper shade of red.
“Thank you. Thank you, thank – ”

Crosse grinned wide, “I should
be the one thanking you for
the generous check.

“It was nothing,” she
said, “it was *nothing*, oh! You
deserve so much more!”

“Mustn’t talk that way,” Crosse
said. “It’ll go to my head (it
tends to carry weight).”

“You’re laughing at me
again,” Gwen pouted. Crosse let
loose once more, rolling.

“Not at you, sweetness,
not a’tall – I’m laughing at
the situation.

“I never thought I’d
set foot in this room again.
Breathe this air. Feet up.

“Look into your bright,
blue eyes. Laugh. It was time to
cash in, Gwen. It was...

“When he spoke to me...
back in that croaker’s shack – he
really spoke to me.

“He almost sounded
human – he was trying for
it, but it didn’t take.

“I don’t think he was
even aware that he was
trying for it. I...”

“You saved me life,” she
said. “You saved mine, too,”
Crosse returned. Quiet –

“You hear that, Mrs.
Pemberly?” Crosse called up and
over his shoulder.

“I heard it,” Mrs.
Pemberly cawed. “It’s about
time you said it, too!”

This time Gwen laughed. Crosse
winked at her, and called again,
“I saved your life, too!”

“I know it,” she said,
“and thank you, too, Mr. Crosse.
Oh, and Mr. Crosse...?”

“Yes, my dear Mrs.
Pemberly?” “My friends call me,
‘Emma!’” She cackled huge.

This time, they both laughed
in earnest and tried to hold
on a bit too long.

They both knew it was
coming, knew it was upon
them at last. Throats cleared.

Gwen took the plunge. “What
about *her*?” Crosse pursed his lips,
looked into his cup.

“This really is great
coffee,” he said. “Really, Gwen.
Greek, you said, isn’t it?”

Throat cleared one, last time,
he looked up, looked past Gwen – past
her gaze. Far, far past.

“She’s gone,” he said. “That’s
what you wanted to hear, isn’t
it? What you hoped for.

“She skipped town. Rocco
tried to stop her – went back to
her that night, after...

“Well, afterwards. Big,
dumb palooka tried to look
out for her. Tried to.

“Tried to play the big
brother that he always thought
he was to her. (*Heh.*)

“How does she repay
him? With two in the gut – from
a colt, just like yours.

“She killed him to his
face – like all of her victims.
Just her style, I guess.

“The fool! The stupid,
big-hearted, overgrown sap!
Too dumb for this life...

“Too *kind* – that was his problem. That’s why he finished out of the money.

“The fool... and I was really starting to like him. And Tony.” Crosse sighed.

He pinched the corners of his eyes between his thumb and index finger.

Rubbed. “Near as the cops can tell, she’s somewhere in the South Pacific.

“So, there’s something you two have in common, sweets: you both love warm weather.

“Except, right now she’s loving it like only a millionaire can. (*Heh.*)

“All told, they think she made off with better than eight million in stained coins.

“Oh, and jewelry, too – can’t forget those pesky diamonds. All that dough...

“Courtesy of the late, great LaBraun. He paid her way to infamy.

“She’ll move like a plague through those golden waters – spread her disease. Those eyes.

“She’ll have fishermen killing themselves with bait wire and hot, bronze ‘what if’s?’”

Crosse stood up quickly
and rubbed the back of his head.
Gwen stood and followed.

“She never loved... loved
anyone, you know,” Gwen said,
with a reaching voice.

“I know.” “You loved her,
though.” “What man wouldn’t? Oh, I
dunno. I guess I...”

“The *idea* of
her – that’s what I loved. That much
I know I loved. Sure...”

“Oh, what difference
does it all make now? She’s gone.
Long gone. Forever.

“And I’m stuck with the
life-long task of washing her
poison from my brain.”

Gwen slid up behind
him. Took his hand. “It makes a
difference, Allen.”

She leaned in. He let
her lean. She kissed him. He let
her kiss. Let her try.

When she pulled back, she
was cold again. Hard. Harder
than before. Like ice.

Except for her eyes.
They glowed in melancholy.
Survivor’s lament.

Crosse didn’t have the words –
not the right ones. True to form,
he spoke anyway.

“Don’t take it so bad,
kid. Nobody’s a better
liar than me,” he sighed.

“And even I couldn’t
convince myself.” He turned and
made haste for the door.

★

Crosse stepped out into
the cold, damp morning. Slung on
his coat. Tipped his hat.

Popped his collar and
stepped off the porch. Let himself
out of the front gate.

Before he let it
snap shut, his lips went tight in
a long, inward smile.

“Boss! Hey, boss!” Dizzy
called. “I’ve been waiting out here
all morning! *Sheesh!*”

Crosse studied the sky
with a pained look. Storm clouds brewed.
Seemed to wait for him.

“When do we get to
solve more crimes, boss? After lunch,
maybe? That’d be swell!”

Crosse wound up the belt
of his overcoat. Drew it
tight. Smiled, head tipped down.

“Say... you don’t look so
hot, boss. Mrs. Pierce wasn’t mean
to you, was she? Well?”

“Ha! Someday, I hope
to have a beautiful dame
treat me so rotten!

“Say...” he quickly went
sober. “What about me, boss?
What about ol’ Diz’?”

“When do I get to
have beautiful dames treating
me rotten?” he asked.

Crosse leaned in close and
patted Dizzy coldly on
the arm. Dizzy beamed.

“Soon as your heart’s old
enough to get broken, kid.
Women sense these things.”

“Oh, boy, boss! Well, how’s
about after lunch, me and
you go down to... boss?”

While Dizzy started
the car, Crosse had turned toward Main
and started walking.

Raindrops cratered the
pavements around him. Bit through
his hat, overcoat.

Sheets of rain on the
horizon. Raking debris
up Victory Lane.

Dizzy called vainly
behind, “Boss? *Boss?* Allen! *Hey,*
Allen! Mr. Crosse...?”

But Crosse could not hear
him – hear any of them. Not
anymore. He walked.

He set his teeth and
felt her – *no, the rain* – biting
his lip. Biting and...

He challenged Fate to
wash this curse from him or kill
him with it. He begged...

In response, the sky
ripped open and the voice of
God boomed forth – thunder.

Heaven's floodgate burst
wide. "*Deus ex machina*,"
Crosse thought. And he walked.

He walked into the
vast blue deluge that swept down
from the dreaming east.