

“Jesus Christ,” I said, jumping halfway off my barstool. The huge cockroach, startled by the movement, bolted back into cover under the bar before I could step on it. Not that I was sure I wanted to. It was about the size of a mouse, stepping on it might only piss it off and give away my position.

The guy next to me had turned to look at me when I jumped. I felt obliged to say something. “Nice joint, huh?” I groused. “They must feed the roaches on steak.”

“Come on, Aidan,” said Al the bartender, “McCann’s is a nice place, but it’s New York, man. You get roaches. Here, have an Amstel on the house.” Al plunked it down and moved off. Al was like McCann’s itself, old and very New York, a bartender for pouring shots and beers to serious drinkers. He might have a fuzzy navel but he wouldn’t know how to make one.

“Thanks, Al.”

“I wonder if that was him?” the guy next to me said. He was slim, good-looking, about my own age of twenty-five.

I glanced at him with little interest. “What was that?”

“The roach,” he said. “I wonder if that was Rafe?”

Ah man, I thought, a psycho.

He looked at me as if divining my thought. “Sorry friend,” he said with the extra careful speech of a guy who was drunk, but trying not to be obnoxious about it, “didn’t mean to intrude.”

Al returned. “Hey Brian,” he said, addressing the stranger, “how about another one?”

“No thanks, Al,” replied Brian. “I’ve probably had enough for tonight. I’ll be heading out after this one.”

Al grinned. “Off to see Nina? Quite a sharp looking lady he’s got there, Aidan. You could learn a thing or two from this guy.”

“I dunno,” said Brian ruefully, “I seem to draw the real high maintenance ones.”

Al snorted. “They’re all high maintenance, Brian, one way or the other.” Having dispensed this gem of bartender wisdom, Al sped off toward some fresh customers.

I looked at Brian with more friendliness. Al’s manner had vouched for him as neither a freak, nor a bore. All important criteria for a bar companion if you were part of that great New York fraternity, Irish Catholics drinking in bars. “So who’s Rafe?”

“You sure you want to know?” Brian asked, “You won’t sleep well after hearing it.”

“Well,” I said, “it won’t be the first tall tale told in McCann’s. Name’s Aidan,” I finished, putting out a hand.

“Brian,” he replied, setting down his half-empty glass to shake, “as you heard. You know, it might be good for me to tell the story. Help me get it straight in my own mind.”

I nodded, sipping my free Amstel, wondering if I would regret my sociable impulse.

“You heard Al mention Nina?” said Brian. I nodded. “She’s quite a girl. Italian, black hair and eyes, figure that makes Marilyn Monroe look like a tomboy. As I said, she’s high maintenance...”

“I was leaving her place on East 69th Street after a night I hope never to forget any detail of. Nothing excites Nina more than my spending money on her, and I’d given her a two-karat rock on a band of gold. She was modeling it for me, wearing it and little else but a bra the structural strength of which would amaze the boys at NASA...

“It’s gorgeous, honey,” Nina said for the hundredth time, “I can’t believe we’re engaged.”

“Glad you like it,” I replied, wondering for the hundredth time what impelled me to go further in a debt I wasn’t even able to make the payments on. Lately VISA had become frosty, MasterCard wasn’t speaking to me, and American Express wouldn’t return my calls. Now I was reduced to borrowing money from Tommy No Tunes, in my old neighborhood of Bensonhurst.

Nina came over, dropped into my lap and vividly reminded me of why my sanity went off-line whenever she was around. An hour later, as I was looking for my socks, she turned to me. “Baby,” she said, “let’s go out somewhere special tonight to celebrate.”

Inwardly I groaned. “Of course, honey, but I gotta go to work now. I’m late already.”

Nina pouted in that 50’s era, sex-kitten fashion she has. It doesn’t work for many, but it works for her. Women of the 21st century mostly want to kill her. Nina couldn’t care less as they’re women and of no use or interest to her.

“Gotta go,” I said hastily, before my willpower failed. I found the socks and fled the apartment. I had to get to work at the brokerage. As I cleared the building door and headed toward Madison Avenue, a hand came out of the alley next to the bagel place and dragged me in.

A few New Yorkers saw, with momentarily widened eyes that averted almost instantly. They walked on as quickly as they could, like zebras ignoring a lion kill. *'Oh well, the lions got Brian today, too bad, at least it wasn't me.'*

I found myself face to unlovely face with Rafe Roveggi, also known as Rafe the Arm, a body-builder doing duty for Tommy No Tunes on collections. Rafe had a very small brain chiefly stimulated by causing pain.

“Brian, you Mick bastard,” Rafe said, as if reading from a prepared speech. “Tommy says you’re late on your payments, and you ain’t showing him no respect when he calls. You hang up on him.”

“Rafe, Rafe, take it easy,” I bleated. “I’ll get the money. I’m going to work right now. Look, I’ll give you everything I got on me.”

“You ain’t got shit on you that I want,” Rafe grunted, little piggy eyes squinting. “But you know Mick, we might work something out. Maybe I didn’t find you today.”

“What do you want, man?” I said.

“Give me the keys to the apartment,” he said. “I’ll take a turn with Nina, give her some nice...”

I hit him. Probably the dumbest move in my life. I slammed two fingers into his right eye, the only thing I could have done that would have hurt him. He wasn’t expecting it from a skinny guy like me and his head snapped back into the wall. I tore free and ran. Rafe, moving fast for a body builder, came after me.

We began a weird chase. We’d run, attract attention, then slow, the gap would close, and I would run some more.

I'm going to die, I thought, terrified and stumbling. He'll kill me slowly for hitting him. They won't even find me in one piece, if they find me at all.

I hadn't wanted a cop till then. I was a Wall Street bond trader running from a loan shark. I could kiss my license goodbye along with my apartment in Manhattan and maybe even Nina. But looking over my shoulder, at Rafe huffing behind me, made me realize that at least I'd be alive. As usual, there wasn't a cop in sight. I raced across 5th Ave. There were always cops near Central Park. Except today. Worse, Rafe had now cut me off from the other side of the street and was charging across, ignoring the abuse of Pakistani cab drivers.

No choice, into the park. I scrambled over the wall and ran. Rafe began crashing through the brush behind me. It was early fall, but the vegetation was still heavy. If he lost sight of me, I had a chance. I ran, like a hunted animal, heart pounding, fear making me nauseous. The park seemed a million miles wide.

Finally, I broke through some brush, sobbing for breath, and ran right into a deer. We both crashed to the ground.

"Aaaahhh," I said.

"Christ," the deer said. "Whaddy nuts, running like that?" It clambered to its feet, blowing and rolling its eyes.

"Uhhhh," I said, staring, my mouth hanging open.

"Good going, Berrynose," called a large black squirrel from a nearby tree, "talk some more for the human, maybe show him a few card tricks, ya dope. I told you it wasn't your mate coming. Jeez."

"Up yours, Bushtail," the deer snapped. "He didn't freaking run you down like a truck. I was startled."

It occurred to me that as the sole representative of the allegedly higher species, I wasn't making words and they were. "Talking animals," I said.

"Oooh, a sharpie," the squirrel said, "nothing gets past this boy. Talking animals, talking animals, why do they always freaking say, talking animals! Can't you come up with something new?" It jumped up and down in annoyance.

"Sorry," I said, gasping for breath and doubting my sanity "I didn't see you."

"Well Ok, Ok," the deer said, still glaring at the squirrel.

There was a crashing noise and a bellow behind me.

"Love to chat," I said, "but I'm being chased by a guy who wants to kill me."

"Yeah, we know," Bushtail the squirrel said, "it's the only way you could get here."

"All right, Berrynose," he said to the deer, "better take him to the council."

The deer nodded then it turned to me. "Okay, buddy, follow me."

The crashing sounds came nearer. Following a talking deer was no more insane than staying to fight Rafe. "You're on."

As we left, I noticed the squirrel was talking to a pigeon. It looked at me, shook its head and flew on ahead of us. I trotted after the deer in silence for a while, then could contain myself no longer.

"Wait, wait a minute," I began.

The deer sighed, "Ok, chill and just keep up. I'll answer the usual questions. It'll save time. Save your breath for running. You humans run lousy."

"Sorry."

"It's all right," the deer responded, "it ain't like you don't have nuclear weapons."

“So you see it’s this way,” continued the deer called Berrynose. “We animals have been getting crowded out of New York since humans showed up. It got worse when the Eurotrash landed.

“The spirit of the forest, one of the Elder Gods, told us, ‘Look. I don’t do so good with humans. Best I can do for you is to make you a magic space. I’ll put the idea for a big park in the brains of these bozos and they’ll keep it a park, no matter how freaking expensive Manhattan real estate gets. It will be a place only animals can find their way to.”

I looked around uneasily, the park seemed lush. I could see more birds than usual, but otherwise it was just Central Park. “How did I get here?”

“I was just getting to that part,” the deer said. “You guys forget sometimes that you’re animals too. So did the Elder Gods, they weren’t always that bright, lived in the country, you know, so what do you expect? Anyway, if one of you comes into the park in an animal state, blind fear, murderous rage, lust, etc, with all the higher functions shut down, sometimes you can break through.”

“Well,” I said, looking nervously over my shoulder, “you got the fear part right.”

We entered a clearing full of animals: rabbits, squirrels, deer, raccoons, all sorts of birds, and a chimp. In the distance I could see the top of the old weather station tower over the lake. We walked slowly up to the chimp. I eyed it warily. Chimps were strong enough to tear a man apart.

“The council,” Berrynose advised, “has come to pass judgment.”

I gulped. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Well,” Berrynose said, “like I told you, our place, our rules.”

We came to a stop before the semicircle of animals, in front of the chimp. He looked up at me thoughtfully.

“I’m Swings-High-in-the-Tree,” the chimp said. “Swing, for short. I’m president of the council this year. You’ve presented me with a problem, human.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Like I told Berrynose, I was running for my life.”

“I understand,” the chimp said, raising a hand. “I had a similar experience getting away from a cosmetics company in New Jersey.

He gestured toward a rock. “Sit down, son.”

I sat. The chimp walked forward and slowly, gently put his hand on my forehead. I felt a strange warmth, a sensation like someone riffling through the pages of a book.

The chimp stepped back. “Well, son,” he said, “You’re all right. Not too bright about females, but that’s usual at your age.”

“Hey,” I protested.

At that moment, Rafe the Arm broke into the clearing. A few good size bucks and a horse were behind him, herding or leading him on. He saw me. “You, you fuck; you’re dead.” He reached under his jacket.

“Run!” I yelled to everyone. “He’s got a gun.”

The animals all stood fast. Rafe kept searching his jacket.

A raccoon strolled up casually, stopping behind the horse. “You looking for this, homeboy?” it asked, brandishing a holstered .38.

“Gimme that,” Rafe yelled. As he started forward, the horse reared and Rafe fell back.

“You gotta no clue,” the raccoon snorted.

“Well,” Swing said, “no need to probe this one. Shall we proceed to judgment?”

“Don’t I get a defense?” I asked weakly, thinking of my last Big Mac as if it was there to accuse me.

“You already had one,” Swing replied.

“Hey fuck you, you stinking animals,” Rafe roared, paraphrasing Charlton Heston as best he could.

“Look who’s talking about stink,” Bushtail said. “Introduce your butt to some soap, will ya?”

Swing looked at me. “We dispense a kind of karmic justice on the humans that come here.”

I thought of all the species that had gone extinct in the last ten years and figured I was next. I also remembered I was wearing a leather jacket.

“Relax,” said Swing, “we don’t do the species guilt thing. It’s just your own ledger.” He consulted with the others for a few seconds, then came back.

“Okay,” he said heavily, “let’s get this done.

“You first, Rafe. You’re the easy choice. Cat-killer, dog-killer, hell, you’ve killed some of just about everything. You have been judged.”

“Fuck you animals,” Rafe screamed at the top of his lungs, advancing toward Swing. Heston would have been proud. A mist enveloped Rafe and his features began to blur. He screamed again and the mist dissipated. No Rafe.

“He’s gone,” I said, wondering if I was next.

“Not quite,” said Swing, “come here.”

I walked forward and looked down. On the grass lay a huge, ugly cockroach, the type that comes out of the sewers at 3AM on Wall Street. “You turned him into a...”

“Yep,” Swing said, “didn’t you ever wonder why there were so many?”

I looked at him, my skin crawling.

“It was nice of you to take that bird to the vet last year,” Swing said. “Keep up that ASPCA membership too. The boys will take you back to the edge of the park and you can be on your way.”

“I swear,” I said, relief making my voice shaky, “I’ll never tell a soul.”

Swing shrugged. “Tell anyone you like. They’ll put you in Bellevue.”

“Sorry about the leather jacket,” I croaked.

“Ah, forget it,” Swing said. “We eat each other too, you know, Nature’s way and all that. Just don’t wipe out the species, that’s all. Take it easy, kid, we won’t meet again.” He reached up and touched my forehead. Next thing I knew I was standing on Fifth, pulling twigs out of my clothes. I called in sick, went home, and hid under my bed.

I looked at Brian’s earnest face and dissolved into laughter. I roared, pounding the bar till tears ran out of my eyes.

“Swing said nobody would believe me,” Brian muttered.

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying to choke off the laughter and the tears. “That was the best story I’ve ever heard. You’ve got a gift, Brian.”

Brian smiled a little shyly. “Thanks, friend, but it’s all true.”

“Really,” I said in fake astonishment. “So what happened with Tommy the loan-shark?”

“Oh,” Brian said. “I told him that his best boy Rafe wasn’t coming back and if he sent anyone else I was going to the cops. I think losing Rafe shook him up. I scraped up half the money. He said to forget the rest but to stay out of the old neighborhood or I’d end up in a dumpster.”

I grinned and shook my head. “What a whopper. Let me buy you a drink. Hell let me buy you several for upholding the tradition of the Irish Tall Tale.”

“Sorry,” Brian said, putting a tip down, “but Nina awaits and you don’t keep Nina waiting. See you around.”

He walked somewhat unsteadily out the door. I watched him go, bemused. I was about to turn back to my drink, when I saw something that made my heart lurch. From under a counter, a large brown roach reappeared, determinedly stalking Brian as he headed out the door. They both disappeared into the night.