

## *Good News, Bad News*

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January 2, 1942 had some good news and some bad news.

First, the good news: I found out that I was 4F and wasn't going off to World War II to be a soldier boy. I didn't feel unpatriotic at all because I had fought my World War II five years before in Spain and had a couple of bullet holes in my ass to prove it.

I'll never figure out why I got shot in the ass. Anyway, it made a lousy war story. People don't look up to you as a hero when you tell them you were shot in the ass. They don't take you seriously but that wasn't my problem any more at all. The war that was starting for the rest of America was over for me.

Now for the bad news: I didn't have any bullets for my gun. I had just gotten a case that I needed my gun for but I was fresh out of bullets. The client that I was going to meet later on in the day for the first time wanted me to show up with a gun and I knew that an empty gun was not what they had in mind.

What was I going to do?

I didn't have a cent to my name and my credit in San Francisco wasn't worth two bits. I had to give up my office in September, though it only cost eight bucks a month, and now I was just working out of the pay telephone in the front hall

of the cheap apartment building I was living in on Nob Hill where I was two months behind in my rent. I couldn't even come up with thirty bucks a month.

My landlady was a bigger threat to me than the Japanese. Everybody was waiting for the Japanese to show up in San Francisco and start taking cable cars up and down the hills, but believe me I would have taken on a division of them to get my landlady off my back.

"Where in the hell is my rent, you deadbeat!" she'd yell at me from the top of the stairs where her apartment was. She was always wearing a loose bathrobe that covered up a body that would have won first prize in a beauty contest for cement blocks.

"The country's at war and you don't even pay your Goddamn rent!"

She had a voice that made Pearl Harbor seem like a lullaby.

"Tomorrow," I'd lie to her.

"Tomorrow your ass!" she'd yell back.

She was about sixty and had been married five times and widowed five times: the lucky sons-of-bitches. That's how she'd come to own the apartment building. One of them left it to her. God had done him a favor when He stalled his car one rainy night on some railroad tracks just outside of Merced. He had been a travelling salesman: brushes. After the train hit his car they couldn't tell the difference between him and his brushes. I think they buried him with some of his brushes in the coffin, believing they were part of him.

In those ancient long-ago days when I paid my rent, she was very friendly to me and used to invite me into her apartment for coffee and doughnuts. She loved to talk about her dead husbands, especially one of them who'd been a plumber. She liked to talk about how good he was at fixing hot water heaters.

Her other four husbands were always out of focus when she talked about them. It was as if the marriages had taken place in murky aquariums. Even her husband who'd been hit by the train didn't merit much comment from her, but she couldn't say enough about the guy who could fix the hot water heaters. I think he was pretty good at fixing her hot water heater, too.

The coffee she served was always very weak and the doughnuts slightly stale because she bought day-old stuff at a bakery a few blocks away on California Street.

I'd have coffee with her sometimes because I didn't have much to do, anyway. Things were just as slow then as they are now except for the case I just got but I had saved up a little money that I'd gotten from being in an automobile accident and settling out of court, so I could still pay my rent, though I'd given up my office a few months before.

In April 1941 I had to let my secretary go. I hated to do that. I spent the five months she worked for me trying to get her in the sack. She was friendly but I barely got to first base with her. We did some kissing at the office but that was about it.

After I had to let her go, she told me to buzz off.

I called her up one night and her parting shot at me over the telephone went something like this: ". . . and besides not being a good kisser, you're a lousy detective. You should try another line of work. Bellboy would suit you perfectly."

*CLICK*

Oh, well . . .

She had a lard ass, anyway. The only reason I hired her was because she would work for the lowest wages this side of Chinatown.

I sold my car in July.

Anyway, here I was with no bullets for my gun and no money to get any and no credit and nothing left to pawn. I

was sitting in my cheap little apartment on Leavenworth Street in San Francisco thinking this over when suddenly hunger started working my stomach over like Joe Louis. Three good right hooks to my gut and I was on my way over to the refrigerator.

That was a big mistake.

I looked inside and then hurriedly closed the door when the jungle foliage inside tried to escape. I don't know how people can live the way I do. My apartment is so dirty that recently I replaced all the seventy-five-watt bulbs with twenty-five-watters, so I wouldn't have to see it. It was a luxury but I had to do it. Fortunately, the apartment didn't have any windows or I might have really been in trouble.

My apartment was so dim that it looked like the shadow of an apartment. I wonder if I always lived like this. I mean, I had to have had a mother, somebody to tell me to clean up, take care of myself, change my socks. I did, too, but I guess I was kind of slow when I was a kid and didn't catch on. There had to be a reason.

I stood there beside the refrigerator wondering what to do next when I got a great idea. What did I have to lose? I didn't have any money for bullets and I was hungry. I needed something to eat.

I went upstairs to my landlady's apartment.

I rang the doorbell.

This would be the last thing in the world that she would expect because I'd spent over a month now trying to elude her like an eel but always being caught in a net of curses.

When she answered the door she couldn't believe that I was standing there. She looked as if her doorknob had been electrified. She was actually speechless. I took full advantage of it.

“Eureka!” I yelled into her face. “I can pay the rent! I can buy the building! How much do you want for it? Twenty thousand cash! My ship has come in! Oil! Oil!”

She was so confused that she beckoned me to come into her apartment and pointed out a chair for me to sit down in. She still hadn’t said a word. I was really cooking. I could hardly believe myself.

I went into the apartment.

“Oil! Oil!” I continued yelling, and then I started making motions like oil gushing from the ground. I turned into an oil well right in front of her eyes.

I sat down.

She sat down opposite me.

Her mouth was still glued shut.

“My uncle discovered oil in Rhode Island!” I yelled across at her. “I own half of it. I’m rich. Twenty thousand cash for this pile of shit you call an apartment building! Twenty-five thousand!” I yelled. “I want to marry you and raise a whole family of little apartment buildings! I want our wedding certificate printed on a NO VACANCY sign!”

It worked.

She believed me.

Five minutes later I had a cup of very weak coffee in my hand and I was munching on a stale doughnut and she was telling me how happy she was for me. I told her that I would buy the building from her next week when the first million dollars’ worth of oil royalties arrived.

When I left her apartment with hunger abated and another week’s housing assured, she shook my hand and said, “You’re a good boy. Oil in Rhode Island.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Near Hartford.”

I was going to ask her for five dollars so that I could buy some bullets for my gun but I figured I'd better let well enough alone.

Ha-ha.

Get the joke?

## *Babylon*

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Uh-oh, I started dreaming of Babylon as I walked back down the stairs to my apartment. It was very important that I not dream of Babylon just as I was starting to get some things worked out. If I got started on Babylon whole hours would pass without my knowing it.

I could sit down in my apartment and suddenly it would be midnight and I would have lost the edge on getting my life back together again whose immediate need was some bullets for my gun.

The last thing in the world that I needed right now was to start dreaming of Babylon.

I had to hold Babylon back for a while, long enough for me to get some bullets. I made an heroic effort as I walked down the stairs of the musty, seedy, tomb-like smelling apartment building to keep Babylon at arm's reach.

It was touch and go there for a few seconds and then Babylon floated back into the shadows, away from me.

I felt a little sad.

I didn't want Babylon to go.

## Oklahoma

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I went into my apartment and got my gun. *I should clean this thing someday*, I thought, as I put it into my coat pocket. Also, I should probably get a shoulder holster. That would be an authentic touch that might help me get more cases.

When I left my apartment to go out into San Francisco to hustle some bullets, my landlady was standing at the top of the stairs, waiting for me.

*Oh, God*, I thought. She's come to her senses. I waited for a huge tirade of curses to bombard my ears and bring my life back to hell on earth again, but it didn't happen. She just stood there watching me as I walked out of the building with a frozen smile on my face.

Just as I was opening the front door, she spoke. Her voice was almost child-like. "Why not oil wells in Oklahoma?" she said. "There's a lot of oil in Oklahoma."

"Too close to Texas," I said. "Salt water flows under the highway."

That finished her off.

There was no reply.

She looked like Alice in Wonderland.



## *Cactus Fog*

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There was no place that I was going to get any money to buy bullets, so I decided to go where there are always bullets: a police station.

I walked down to the Hall of Justice on Kearny Street to see a detective that I knew down there and once had been very good friends with to see if I could borrow some bullets from him.

Maybe he would loan me six until I met my client and got an advance. I was supposed to meet them in front of a radio station down on Powell Street. It was now two p.m. I had four hours to get some bullets. I hadn't the slightest idea who my client was or what they wanted done except that I was to meet them in front of the radio station at six and then they would tell me what they wanted done and I'd try to get an advance from them.

Then I'd give my landlady a few bucks and tell her that an armored car bringing me the million dollars had gotten lost in a cactus fog near Phoenix, Arizona, but she shouldn't worry because the fog was guaranteed to lift any day now and then the money would be on its way.

If she asked me what a cactus fog was, I'd tell her it was the worst kind of fog because it had sharp spines on it. It made

moving around in it a very dangerous proposition. It was best to stay where you were at and just wait until it went away.

The million dollars is waiting for the fog to pass.

## *My Girlfriend*

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It was a fast hike down to the Hall of Justice. I'd gotten used to walking in San Francisco and could move around at a good clip.

I started 1941 off with a car and now a year later, here I was totally relying on my feet. Life has its ups and downs. The only place my life could go now was up. The only thing lower than me was a dead man.

It was a cold windy day in San Francisco but I enjoyed the walk down Nob Hill to the Hall of Justice.

I started to think about Babylon as I neared Chinatown but was able to change the marquee in my mind just in time. I saw some Chinese kids playing in the street. I tried to figure out what kind of game they were playing. By concentrating on the kids, I was able to avoid Babylon rolling toward me like a freight train.

Whenever I was trying to get something done and Babylon started coming upon me I'd try to focus on anything that could keep it away. It was always very hard because I really like to dream of Babylon and I have a beautiful girlfriend there. This is a hard thing to admit but I like her better than real girls. I've always wanted to meet a girl that interested me as much as my friend in Babylon.

I don't know.  
Maybe someday.  
Maybe never.

## *Sergeant Rink*

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After the Chinese kids' game I thought about my detective friend to keep Babylon away. He was a sergeant and his name was Rink. He was a very tough cop. I think he held the world's record for being tough. He had perfected a slap across the face that left an exact hand print on it like a temporary brand. That slap was just a friendly greeting from Sergeant Rink compared to how things got later on if you weren't very, very cooperative.

I met Rink when we were both trying out for the force back in '36. I wanted to be a cop. We were very good friends back then. We might be on the force together right now, partners solving murders, if only I had managed to pass the final examination. My score was close, though. I was just five points away from being a cop.

Dreaming of Babylon got the best of me. I would have been a good cop, too. If only I had been able to stop dreaming of Babylon. Babylon has been such a delight to me and at the same time such a curse.

I didn't answer the last twenty questions of the test. That's why I failed. I just sat there dreaming of Babylon while everybody else answered the questions and became policemen.

## *The Hall of Justice*

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I never really cared about the way the Hall of Justice looks. It's a huge, tomb-like gloomy-looking building and inside it always smells like rotten marble.

I don't know.

Maybe it's just me.

Probably.

One interesting thing, though, is: I've been in the Hall of Justice a couple of hundred times at least and I never think about Babylon when I'm there, so it does serve some purpose for me.

I took the elevator up to the fourth floor and found my detective friend sitting at his desk in the homicide department. My friend resembles exactly what he is: a very tough cop who's interested in solving murder cases. The only thing he likes better than a nice juicy homicide is a sirloin steak smothered with onions. He was in his early thirties and built like a Dodge pickup.

The first thing I noticed was his shoulder holster with a nice-looking .38 police special resting comfortably in it. I was particularly attracted to the bullets in the gun. I would have liked all six of them but settled for three.

Sergeant Rink was very carefully examining a letter opener.

He looked up.

“A sight for sore eyes,” he said.

“What do you need a letter opener for?” I said, slipping into the genre. “You know that reading isn’t one of your gifts.”

“Still selling dirty pictures?” he said, smiling. “Tijuana valentines? The ones for dog lovers?”

“No,” I said. “Too many cops kept asking for samples. They cleaned me out.”

The private detective business was very slow one time when the Worlds Fair was going on over at Treasure Island in ’40, so I supplemented my income by selling a few “art” photographs to the tourists.

Sergeant Rink always liked to kid me about them.

I’ve done a lot of things in my life that I haven’t been proud of, but the worst thing I ever did was getting as poor as I was now.

“This is a murder weapon,” Rink said, dropping the letter opener on his desk. “It was found in a prostitute’s back early this morning. No clues. Only her body in a doorway and this.”

“The murderer was confused,” I said. “Somebody should have taken them to a stationery store and pointed out the difference between an envelope and a whore.”

“Oh, boy,” Rink said, shaking his head.

He picked up the letter opener again.

He turned it very slowly over in his hand. Watching him play with a murder weapon wasn’t getting me any closer to some bullets for my gun.

“What do you want?” he said, staring at the letter opener, not bothering to look up at me. “You know the last time I loaned you a buck I said that was it, so what do you want? What can I do for you except give you directions to the Golden Gate Bridge and a few basics on how to jump? When are you

going to give up this silly notion of you being a private detective and get a paying job and out of my hair? There's a war going on. They need everybody. There must be something you can do."

"I need your help," I said.

"Ah, shit," he said, finally looking up. He put the letter opener down and reached into his pocket and took out a handful of change. He very carefully selected two quarters, two dimes and a nickel. He put them down on the desk and then pushed them toward me.

"That's it," he said. "Last year you were worth five bucks, then you dropped to one. Now you're a seventy-five-center. Get a job. For Christ's sake. There must be something you can do. I know one thing for sure: detective work isn't it. Not many people want to hire a detective who's only wearing one sock. You could probably count them on your hand."

I was hoping that Rink wouldn't notice that, but of course he had. I was thinking about Babylon in the morning when I got dressed and didn't notice that I was only wearing one sock until I walked into the Hall of Justice.

I was going to tell Rink that I didn't need the seventy-five cents, which of course I did, but what I really wanted was some bullets for my gun.

I tried to size up the situation.

I had limited options.

I could take the seventy-five cents and be ahead of the game or I could say: No, I don't want the money. What I want is some bullets for my gun.

If I took the seventy-five cents and then asked him for the bullets, he might really blow his stack. I had to be very careful because as I said earlier: He was one of my friends. You can imagine what the people who didn't like me were like.



I looked at the seventy-five cents on his desk.

Then I remembered a minor criminal I knew who lived in North Beach. As I remembered he had a gun once. Maybe he still had it and I could get some bullets for my gun from him.

I picked up the seventy-five cents.

“Thank you,” I said.

Rink sighed.

“Get your ass out of here,” he said. “The next time I see you I want to be looking at an employed man who’s eager to repay eighty-three dollars and seventy-five cents to his old friend Rink. If I see anything that resembles you the way you are now, I’ll vag you and make sure you get thirty days. Pull yourself together and get the fuck out of here.”

I left him playing with the letter opener.

Maybe it would give him an idea for a lead that would solve the case of the murdered prostitute.

Also, maybe, he could take it and shove it up his ass.