

Rocco, the Original

Melvin fished some change out of his pocket and placed it on the bar top. He drained the last of his drink as the singer drained the last ounce of drama out of “Willow Weep for Me” and bowed her head. He shook his own head, reflecting on a world that felt smug and happy at letting a talent like that peak at the level of receptionist, as the singer had told him between numbers the week before. And the bassist accompanying her still had on his Muni bus driver's uniform from his day job.

Melvin took a deep breath as the vibrato of the last note faded away in the suddenly silent club. He caught the bartender's eye and shook his head and got an appreciative nod in return. The bartender came over as conversation buzzed again. “You okay, man?”

“Fine as wine, Maurice. Well, it's getting late—think I'll take a cab.” He stood up and the bartender grinned and tapped Melvin's coins on the plank before pocketing them. Melvin paused at the doorway to wave, then walked through the curtains and had his keys out as he hit the sidewalk in the night outside. He got in his cab and started the motor. The cab radio blared, suddenly loud in the darkness. As he fumbled to cut it off a man came out of the shadows and held up his hand.

“Want a fare?”

You always get one when you don't want one, he thought. It was a fortyish White man in a sharp suit. Must be lost. Maybe he was going to a hotel downtown, by the garage. Melvin pushed a button on the power window console and the passenger window came down. "I'm turnin in—which way you goin?"

"North Beach."

"Sorry, man." Melvin apologetically waved his hand. "If you were goin downtown—"

"Hey, that's fine, too. Any place." The man tried to open the passenger door, but it was locked. Just then a limousine came around the corner and stopped in the street next to them. A man popped open the right rear door and jumped out on the street. He pulled out a gun and aimed across the hood of Melvin's cab at his would-be passenger.

Melvin reacted automatically—he gunned his engine, slipped into drive and cut the wheel. His fender caught the gunman in his side and knocked him down, sending the gun flying in the air. He jammed on his brakes and looked for a way out, but he was blocked by cars fore and aft, and a lamp post blocked the way to the sidewalk.

Another man with a gun came out of the right front door of the limo. Then the left rear door opened. Melvin slid onto the floorboard and felt under the seat for his tire iron. A lot of good this'll do me, he thought, ruing the day he'd forsworn packing a gun when he drove.

He heard footsteps, then grunting and the sound of a body being dragged on the ground. "C'mon, hurry up!" someone shouted, and then the limousine roared off, doors slamming. He started to let out his breath but stopped short when he saw an arm holding

a gun reach through the passenger window. He pushed the power window button on the arm rest over his head and the window quickly whined up and squeezed the arm. He snatched the gun and sat up, still on the floorboard, twisted around and aimed the gun at the owner of the arm. It was his would-be passenger. "Jesus Christ!" the man said.

"That's just who you was fixin to meet," Melvin said.

"Once in a day is enough already. Hey, drop the window, you're breakin my arm, for chrissakes."

"Oh, sorry." Melvin lowered the window. "I thought you were one of them when I saw your arm over my head."

"You don't have to apologize; you can save my butt anytime." The man rubbed his arm. "The gun was for you; you earned it. You knocked it outta that guy's hand when you hit him. Hey, I owe you one. Name's Rocco."

"Melvin." Melvin awkwardly reached for Rocco's extended hand with his own left from his half-reclined position on the floorboard. "Pardon my left," he said, then laughed at the incongruity of it all. He regained his seat and looked across at Rocco.

"I still need a ride."

"Yeah, I can see that. Fuckit, hop in." He unlocked the rear door and Rocco climbed in.

"And I think we could both use a drink," Rocco said.

"I heard that." What the hell, Melvin thought, with the vision of his empty apartment in his mind. He handed the gun to Rocco. "I don't want this, though." He pointed outside to where the limousine had been. "Did you catch their license plate

number?”

“That's okay—I know who it was.”

“Uh-huh.” Something told Melvin to not pry. He turned to the front and in his rear view mirror he caught Rocco eying his left hand on the steering wheel. He started up the engine and held up his hand. “Lost the finger last year. You might've read about it in the paper.”

“Got me.” Rocco looked behind them. “You don't suppose I could talk you into North Beach now?”

“Yeah, sure.” At a light on Geary Melvin pulled a folded up newspaper clipping out of his wallet, opened it and handed it to Rocco.

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The light changed and they started off again. “Yeah, this lady was leaning over the pier, looking at a seal, and she fell in the water. I was sittin there drinkin, you know? So I jumped up and got a life preserver off the pier and threw it down to her, but she couldn't get an arm or anything in it. She couldn't swim and was really struggling, and you know how cold the Bay is.” Rocco nodded.

“So what could I do? I jumped in and tied the preserver's line around her and some guys who'd been fishing on the pier hauled her out. Then they threw the ring back to me but I just happened to grab the rope first and the motherfuckers had got so excited

about hauling me up that they snatched my finger off before I could stop em.”

“Damn! You mean—”

“I got my finger caught in this snap connector thing, see, and it caught me by my wedding ring.”

Rocco grimaced as Melvin demonstrated how his finger had been ripped off.

“That's what they mean when they say 'virtue is its own reward,' ” Rocco said.

They went through the Broadway tunnel and worked their way through a couple of alleys to a parking lot. “You can park here,” Rocco said. “It won't cost anything; this guy owes me.”

Melvin parked and they got out of the cab and walked through the lot to the sidewalk. Rocco gave a short wave and nod to the sleepy attendant sitting in a car near the entrance and that was that. He led Melvin around the corner to the closed door of a social club. The windows had been painted over from the inside. The street was dark, and for an instant Melvin flashed on this being an elaborate setup for a mugging, as improbable as the circumstances were. He snorted, thinking this would be a hard one to explain at work, him being mugged by a White man. Rocco looked at him. “Hey, it's okay,” and that was supposed to be the last word, the way he said it.

An old man inside peered out through a clear section in the window when Rocco rapped on the glass with a knuckle. He waved his forefinger at Rocco. “C'mon, Rocco, we're closing up now.”

“You're always bustin my coliones.” Rocco made a gesture Melvin had never seen before, but he instinctively knew it to be an insult. It was a fist with the forefinger and

little finger extended like horns.

“Tomorrow, Rocco, come back tomorrow.” The old man sat down heavily in his chair. He gestured to another man inside who began upending chairs and setting them down on the tables.

Rocco turned to Melvin, who had been quick to turn away. “Hey, they really was closin, all right? I told you it was okay. I'll take you by here some other time. C'mon, let's hit B & G before they lock us out, too.”

Melvin noticed that Rocco glanced behind them as they walked along the street and took a long look before crossing Columbus. Melvin looked too.

A man with a white apron around his waist stood in the doorway of the bar as Melvin and Rocco approached. He had his arms folded and his head cocked and blocked a suited man from escorting his wife inside. “I don't care what *your* watch says, bar time is bar time. And we're closed.”

“Well, can't we at least get in to call a cab?”

Rocco came up to the bartender and winked, putting his arm around Melvin. “Come on in, Rocco,” the bartender said. “Sure thing, buddy,” he added to Melvin.

“Hey, how come they—” the frustrated man started.

“Because they're regulars. And no, you can't come in to call a cab. Get one down on Broadway.” He ushered in Rocco and Melvin as the man spluttered outside.

Rocco caught Melvin's gaze. “Kinda tab I run, they gotta let me in—right, Sal? Piss *me* off an' you'll go bankrupt.”

The bartender got behind the plank and slammed down a leather cup of liar's dice

on the bar top. "I got yer bankrupt right here."

Melvin looked around and of course, it being North Beach, he was the only Member in the place. Four men in a booth looked at him, then at each other. One sneered and hid his face behind his hand and said something and the others laughed. Rocco firmly turned Melvin around toward the bar and loudly said, "This is Melvin," nominally to the bartender.

"Melvin Nigger," somebody behind them muttered. Melvin swung his head around as laughter roiled from the booth. Then Rocco turned around and the bar grew quiet. The four men at the table were the last to stop talking. They looked down at their table, sneaking little glances at Rocco, and Melvin knew his own glare had not been what had stopped them cold. He took a breath and unclenched his fists. He let Rocco tug him back around to face the plank.

"Hey, Tommy!" the bartender barked, his geniality gone. "Play something on the box!" He slid some quarters along the bartop to a bystander, who dutifully fed them into the jukebox. The treacly harmony of 40s swing music replaced the hum of tension in the room.

Rocco looked at Melvin and squeezed his arm. "When I say it's okay, it's okay, capeesh?"

Melvin smiled. "Capisco."

Rocco turned to the bartender. "See, Slats, he's half Italian already."

"Hey, not bad," the bartender beamed at Melvin. "Now I'll just trot out the soulshake I learned in 'Nam," and he started a clowning solo dap; Melvin joined him and

they came to a raggedy, laughing finish.

“His name is Sal, so we call him Slat. Hey, Slat, is this a bar or what? Give my friend here a drink, will ya? Don't make it too strong; he's gotta go home an' bang his old lady.”

The bartender turned and made a laughing riposte in Italian to Rocco, who was riveted on Melvin's suddenly fallen smile. “You like Chevas, Melvin?” Melvin nodded, and Rocco turned to the bartender. “Make that two Chevas, Slat. Soda on the side.” The bartender left and Rocco turned to Melvin. “Melvin, I—”

“No problem, man.”

“You'd just told me about the wedding ring and I—I'm sorry.”

“You didn't do anything wrong, man. She passed away just over a year ago. I still had my ring on when this happened,” and he held up his left hand, “ 'cause . . . it's hard to explain.”

“I know how you feel.”

Melvin cocked an eye at Rocco. Rocco shook his head. “I *know* how you feel. I lost mine ten years ago next month.”

“Oh.”

“It's a lousy thing to have in common.”

“Yeah.”

The drinks came and Rocco took Melvin to a booth. “Well, nobody can tell you how to feel,” Rocco started. “Or what to do. All I know is it's best to keep busy.”

“Yeah, that's when I feel better—well, at least not so bad.”

“Booze was the only thing for me for a while, but then I noticed it was dragging me down. But everybody's different. Ya gotta do it your own way.” He took a sip. “You drive full time?”

“Yeah. The cab thing is good, 'cause when I can't take it any more I can take off, or if I feel like it I can drive extra board, pull an extra shift, you know, get out of the house.”

“You stay in the same place?”

“Yeah, I thought about movin, but I dunno . . . ”

“Either way it's tough. I stayed in our place for six months after it happened, then I figured it was best to get rid of everything, so I sold the house, the car, got rid of all the furniture we'd bought together, Francesca's photographs, everything. That was a mistake.” Rocco shook his head. “I just thought about her more.” He took another little sip and looked at the glass in his hand.

Melvin took a taste of his own drink. “Yeah, I thought about leavin outta our place, too, but I just couldn't throw out her photographs and things, so I figured it was better to stay and fight it out, you know?” He sighed. “I'm still fightin it.” His voice was thick. He swirled the ice cubes in his drink.

A man stuck his head around the corner of the booth. Rocco waved him away. A tear ran down Melvin's cheek. Rocco swallowed hard, and the two men, strangers but an hour before, sat in easy, intimate silence as if they had known each other for years and breathed deeply together.

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The next time Melvin drove to North Beach the Broadway action was jumping. Across the street one of the strip's last club barkers tried to hustle three young men with short military haircuts. "Come on in—it's terrible! What can I tell ya. They're all naked in there. Would I lie to the three of yez? You could pound me if I'm lyin. Take a look. Go on, it's free! I mean, *naked!*" Melvin thought they had it all wrong; the hustle should be to charge admission to watch the barker.

He parked his cab in front of B & G's and went inside to a raucous crowd watching a boxing match on television. The men cheered and jeered as the younger, stronger fighter suddenly stumbled during a desultory exchange and sank to his knees. The older fighter seemed to be completely surprised.

"Get up, ya bum, ya!" hollered a red-faced spectator in the bar.

"He'd be better off stayin down," somebody responded.

"Whaddaya mean, Rafer never even touched him!"

The younger fighter got to his feet at the count of eight, but the referee talked to him for a few moments and called the fight off. Boos rang out and fans threw wadded up newspapers and cushions into the ring. A bartender stood on a chair and turned down the sound on the television as the bar customers hooted and hollered on their own. Melvin spotted Rocco then, laughing as he collected his bets. People handed Rocco hundred-dollar bills with the casualness usually shown when handling fives or tens.

"You're a bigger bum than Rafer or Thomas with that tank job, ya bum ya," said a fat man smoking a skinny, crooked cigar, as he handed Rocco two hundred-dollar bills. His cigar made Melvin cough. All we need now is for that barker on Broadway to come

in and stir up the shit some more, he thought.

Melvin nursed a beer until Rocco finished collecting his bets and came over to him. “Hey, how's it hangin,” Rocco said. “You get down on the fight?”

“Naw, I never was much for gambling. Saw my daddy lose too much at it.”

“Well, you bettah off,” Rocco said, in a Chinese accent. “So, takin it easy tonight, huh?” He pointed to Melvin's half-full beer glass.

“Huh? Oh, I'm still in the middle of my shift. I always watch it when I drive.”

“Yeah, you can't be too careful. Hey, you want a little fare? A little shorty?”

Melvin shrugged his shoulders. Rocco stuck his wad of bills in an envelope and licked the flap, sealed it and stuck it in the inside pocket of his sports jacket and started for the door. “Come on; we'll be back in ten minutes.”

“Where we going?” Melvin asked, once they were inside the cab. Rocco rode up front with him this time.

“Chinatown.”

“But that's just a couple of blocks.”

“Yeah, but I don't want to walk around like this,” and Rocco patted the outside of his jacket where he'd stuffed the envelope. Melvin nodded.

Rocco directed him a few blocks away to an alley just below Grant. Melvin's eyes started to grow wide as Rocco reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small dark object, until he saw it was a BlackBerry. Rocco quickly keyed in a number and softly muttered a few words and broke the connection. Melvin would have sworn that Rocco had spoken in Chinese, this time the real thing.

Rocco caught him eying the device in his hand. “Whaddaya think, I'm some kind of Moustache Pete, like them old farts in that social club I took you by the other night? You should see the computer I'm getting next week. Don't judge my action by this chickenshit little tank job. I just do this for the contacts.”

“Uh-huh.” Melvin turned his head to see what Rocco was looking at. It was a younger Chinese man in a very stylish suit who had just stepped out of a side door in the alleyway. He approached the cab.

“From Uncle,” he said, extending an envelope to Rocco.

“From Uncle's friend,” Rocco answered, and he ripped open the envelope and handed the young man a bill. The young man raised a hand to protest but relented, taking the bill and smiling. It was a hundred. “See, there's plenty enough to go around,” Rocco said to Melvin, and he held up a hundred dollar note for him as well. Melvin hesitated. “Take, take,” Rocco said, and he stuffed the bill into Melvin's cigar box stash on his dashboard. The young man smiled at Melvin.

“Give my regards to your uncle,” Rocco said to the young man, as he surreptitiously motioned to Melvin to get moving. “See ya around.” He waved to the young man as they drove off.

“Kid probably thinks I'm a Moustache Pete myself,” Rocco laughed. “Well, it's all about contacts. The human element. But all that old crap is changing. It's not about wiseguys whacking each other anymore, you know?”

Melvin didn't know, but he nodded his head anyway. He had a fair idea what was being talked about, though, and he knew he was close to being in over his head.

“They don't pay us to keep off their candy store windows today; now they pay a 'consultant's fee' to prevent a geek kid we hire from hacking files in their computer system. Clean, bloodless. What you saw the other night is exceptional, some freelancers, you know?”

“Uh-huh,” Melvin mumbled.

“Soon as I finally meet Uncle back there,” Rocco pointed behind them as they crawled through traffic, “I can dispense with this cash in envelopes bullshit. We'll meet, then our beard will talk to his beard and we'll do business.”

“Beats working, I guess.”

“Speaking of which, can you drive a limo? If you want, I might have some work for you. I can use a good wheel man.”

“Man, I'm lucky to have a license at all. One more ticket and the DMV nabs my license. They sent me a letter last week about it.”

“Too many tickets? How many you got?”

“Three I got nailed for plus this one I'm fightin right now. Can't take traffic school, 'cause I'm a high risk already.”

“You can always take traffic school.”

Melvin parked in front of the bar. He held up his wallet. “Can't. See, it says right here,” and he pulled out a folded up letter. “After two tickets in a year you can't go to traffic school anymore.”

“Let's see that ticket.” Rocco looked it over, nodded and pocketed it.

“Hey, I'll need that.”

“No you won't. You ain't got a ticket anymore. Believe it. Can you meet me for lunch tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

“How about twelve-thirty. Remember that club I took you to last week?”

“The one we couldn't get in”

“Yeah. With the painted windows. Can you find it?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, be there at twelve-thirty. And you be straight, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good. I'll jump out here. See ya,” and Rocco waved goodbye.

The next day Melvin put on slacks and a sport coat and met Rocco outside the club. Rocco looked preoccupied. “Follow my lead. Just speak to those who talk to you directly.”

“Okay by me.”

This time they were ushered right inside. The place was full of diners at tables and booths, varying in dress from neighborhood casual to full business suit regalia. A waiter went through a back door with a tray full of food, revealing a back room also full of tables. Rocco brought Melvin to a table full of older men dressed in old-fashioned, cuffed suit pants and sweaters over frayed dress shirts and comfortably worn shoes. He introduced Melvin to a nondescript-looking man with grey stubble on his face. “Here's the guy I was telling you about, Finooch.” The man looked at Melvin but didn't react.

For an instant Melvin thought he'd been had, that this almost seedy-looking old man was nobody in particular, and Rocco just one of those all-talk fantasizers he'd grown up around, that he'd been a fool to have given this glad-hander his ticket. Then Rocco caught a waiter's gaze and nodded as the man at the table grasped Melvin's hand in a long, surprisingly strong grip. The waiter opened the door to the back room, exposing a group of heavysset, powerful-looking White men in three-piece suits eating pasta and shellfish. One of the men looked up at Melvin as he delicately held a forkful of pasta in his hand.

“I've heard good things about you. Rocco says you're a stand-up guy,” the old man said to Melvin. Rocco nodded and the waiter let the inside door swing shut. At this the seated man rreleased Melvin's hand and waved him on his way.

Out on the street Rocco handed him a paper. “Well, that's it. Go to this court tomorrow morning, nine o'clock. Department A.”

“But I'm not due to see the man till next month. And it's Department—”

“Fuck next month. Listen to me. Tomorrow, nine o'clock, Department A. Believe it.”

Melvin nodded his head. In Rocco's presence he believed anything.

The next day he went to court and stepped forth when he heard his name called. The judge delicately held his pen in the air at a certain angle that made him flash on the man he'd seen through the inner door of the club the day before, eating pasta.

“No written report from the officer. Case dismissed.” The judge avoided Melvin's eyes. “Believe it,” Rocco had said.

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“Hey, that was great!” Melvin said, drink in his hand. “Now I owe you one.”

“A ticket's nothin compared to what you did for me that night, Melvin. You made a friend for life. I don't forget. Hey, you paid your other three tickets yet?”

“Two of em. That last one, the judge gave me a month to pay it. I got about a week to go, I guess.”

“You got the ticket on you? I gotta have the original. Then I can fix anything.”

“Sure. Melvin grinned and reached for his wallet. A group of men crowded around the television set behind Rocco, watching a horse race.

Rocco looked at the ticket and pocketed it as before. “Don't worry about this one. I can get you a traffic school certificate.”

“But I lost in court. The judge—”

“Fuck the judge. He decided to give you a break after all. It's fixed. Believe it.”

“Melvin laughed. “I believe, I believe. You made a believer out of me with that judge.” He tossed down the rest of his drink and signaled for another.

“This is nothin. It's just a step past the old days. But wait'll we get this new system on line. We'll be able to fix *anything* then.”

“Almost anything,” Melvin said, reaching for his new drink. “Some things can't be fixed, capeesh?”

Rocco looked at him. “You'd be surprised.” Behind him the men bunched around the TV set erupted in cheers and groans. Several came walking toward Rocco, shaking their heads and reaching for their wallets. Rocco held his gaze on Melvin.

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Melvin triumphantly waved his Motor Vehicles Department printout as he entered the bar and spotted Rocco. “Man, I don't know how you—”

Rocco frowned. “Hey, ya gotta be cool, y'know?” He glanced around the bar.

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I just got so excited. See? Now I got a clean record.”

Rocco looked preoccupied. “Yeah, yeah . . . better put that thing away.” He raised his eyebrows when he saw Melvin stuff the paper in his wallet with his left hand, the one missing most of a finger. “Oh, yeah . . . hey, can I see that article again? About when you lost your finger? I just wanna show it to a friend of mine.”

“Sure. Here's a xerox.”

“Hey, you know me by now. I only want to see the original.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Melvin laughed. “Okay, I'll go along with the program. I'll keep the copy and you take the original. Here.”

Rocco pocketed the paper and stood up. “Hey, I'll be back in a minute, okay?” He walked past the bathrooms and opened a door in back and stepped inside an office.

Melvin picked up his drink, then set it down. His ring finger was tingling again, the first time in months that he'd had the phantom pains people feel from missing fingers or limbs until their bodies adjust to the loss. He switched hands and took a good taste, then looked at the copy of the clipping.

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he read again. Well, there it was. No good deed goes unpunished.

“Slats! You seen Rocco?” Melvin was breathless. The bartender finished polishing the glass in his hand and set it down.

“Nope, haven't seen him all day.”

“Look at this!” Melvin held up his left hand.

“Looks just like a hand,” Slats said, picking up another wet glass. “Bet you got another one just like it on the other side.”

“But look—”

Just then Rocco stepped out from the back room, dressed as if for a wedding, replete with tuxedo and cummerbund.

“Rocco! Look!” Melvin held up his hand. “It's a miracle! I've heard of little kids growing back a fingertip, but never—”

Rocco matter-of-factly looked at Melvin's hand. “Looks good, Melvin. Got all your sensations back in it already?”

“Yeah, it's just like it never happened!”

“That's nice. Look, Melvin, I gotta run now. I got something I wanna go over with you later, but not just right now, okay? I'll catch you next time.”

“Yeah, sure.” Rocco motioned to a similarly dressed man who had followed him out of the back room and pointed to his watch and the two hurriedly left.

Melvin looked at Slats. “A wedding or something?”

“Naw, it's Rocco's twentieth wedding anniversary. Him and Francesca. They're having a big deal over on Green Street. Big family thing, you know?”

“Francesca? Twentieth?” Melvin did a slow burn. He set down his unfinished beer and stalked off.

The door to the social club was wide open for once and an overflow crowd spilled out onto the sidewalk right in front of Melvin's cab. The women wore fancy dresses, the men suits and tuxedos, the children their best outfits. A live band played festive Italian music inside, where all the tables had been lined up against the walls and supported a huge, fancy buffet.

Melvin climbed out of his cab and approached the door. Several people stared at him, and he was suddenly aware of his bare threads and oh yes, they were White. And he wasn't. “He's driving that cab,” somebody explained to an unheard question at one side. “Oh,” someone else answered.

He paused at the doorway as his eyes adjusted to the light inside. He saw a knot of smiling and laughing people crowded around Rocco and a woman almost young enough to be his daughter. She gathered a full bridal train in one hand and held Rocco's hand with her other.

“Hey, what gives?” Melvin heard from over his shoulder. He turned around. A beefy man on the sidewalk was glowering at him.

“I'm a friend of Rocco's.”

“You are, huh? Well, this is a private party.”

“I just—”

“You want me to make it plain?” The man grabbed Melvin's shirt. As he reached for the man's arm Melvin heard footsteps behind him, from within the club.

“Hey, Vincent, it's all right. Let go.” It was Rocco. The big man loosened his grip and stepped aside. Melvin turned around to face Rocco, a grimace still on his face from the encounter with the would-be bouncer.

“Melvin, you surprised me. I—”

“You surprised me, too.”

Rocco looked pained. “Melvin, not here. I'll explain later.”

“What's to explain? I guess you meant well, felt sorry for me, I dunno. So you said we had that one thing in common. Hey, I'm glad we don't. I'm happy for you. Only that's not the kind of thing you should bullshit about.” Melvin turned to go.

“Melvin, I didn't bullshit—” Rocco put his hand on Melvin's shoulder, but Melvin jerked away from his grasp and stepped outside. A big white limousine slowly came around the corner. This is where I came in, Melvin thought, turning to check out Rocco, who had followed him to the sidewalk. “Melvin, I gotta take care of this now. We'll talk. Trust me.”

The limousine stopped and the passengers emerged. There were two couples, one perhaps in their late sixties and another in their thirties. The older woman appeared to be in chronic poor health and her strained face had more of the look of someone at a funeral than at a wedding anniversary, Melvin thought.

The younger woman broke loose from the group and ran past Rocco to the

doorway and looked inside the club. She squealed with joy and ran inside. The older woman swayed as if to faint, and Rocco rapidly walked to her side and joined her companion in supporting her. The young woman ran back outside and squealed, “Momma, you should see her! She looks just like she did when . . .” Her face briefly fell and then she regained her joyful look. “Momma, you wouldn't believe it! She hasn't aged in ten years!”

The man at her side hugged her. “What did you expect? Naturally she didn't age.”

Melvin stopped in his tracks. He watched the group approach the club through the well-wishers who hugged and kissed them. The older woman at the center of the sidewalk throng looked inside the club and shrieked. “Francesca!” She took a step forward and collapsed in the doorway, only being prevented from totally falling out by her escorts' grasps. Melvin was caught in the crush of people surging forward to help carry her inside. The beefy bouncer type and another man stood between him and the doorway, their arms folded across their chests. The young woman inside shrieked “Momma!” and then the doors closed.

Melvin slowly unclenched his hands and looked at his ring finger.

Melvin's hand shook so that he spilled some of his drink onto his xeroxed clipping.

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it now said. He continued looking through the box, dragging out letters, postcards, a woman's jewelry. Finally he turned the box upside down and spread out the contents on his kitchen table. He gazed a long time at fading sepia photographs and sniffed an old letter, remembering how it had once borne traces of perfume.

Finally he found what he had been looking for, the envelope from the city. He breathed deeply and unfolded the paper inside. There was her name, place of birth, a brief paragraph on the cause of her death. An official seal was embossed on the document, just like the one on her birth certificate next to the prints of those little feet.

He reached for his drink, then stopped. No; he had to drive. He folded up the document, placed it inside its envelope and then slipped it into his inside jacket pocket. He stood up. Not bad. He could handle it.

Outside the sun was shining. "What the hell, think I'll take a cab," he said out loud, getting behind the wheel. He smiled as people tried to flag him down. Usually he'd wave his microphone at them as he passed them by as a show of courtesy, to imply he was on the way to a radio call, but today he just smiled and drove ahead, through the tunnel and into the traffic of North Beach.

"I gotta have the original," Rocco had said. Melvin smiled some more and patted his pocket. Little Italy was just ahead.