

MAN WITH A BELLY

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John Bracken sat on the park bench and waited to make his hit. The bench was one of the many on the outskirts of James Memorial Park, which borders the south side of Hammond Street. In the daytime the park is overrun by kids, mother wheeling prams, and old men with bags of crumbs for the pigeons. At night it belongs to the junkies and muggers. Respectable citizens, women in particular, avoided Hammond Street after dark. But Norma Correzente was not most women.

He heard her approach on the stroke of eleven, as always. He had been there since quarter of. The beat-cop wasn't due until 11:20, and everything was on top.

He was calm, as he always was before a hit. He was a cold and efficient workman, and that was why Vittorio had hired him. Bracken was not a button-man in the Family sense; he was an independent, a journeyman. His family resided completely within his wallet. This was why he had been hired.

There was a pause in the footfalls as she paused at the intersection of Hammond and Pardis Avenue. Then she crossed, probably thinking of nothing but covering the last block, going up to her penthouse suite, and pouring a large Scotch and water.

Bracken got ready, thinking it was a strange contract. Norma Correzente, formerly Norma White of the Boston Whites, was the wife of Vito Correzente. The marriage had been headline material - rich society bitch weds notorious Vito ("I'm just a businessman"). The Wop. It was not a novelty to the clan; aging Don marries a young woman of blood. Murder by contract was not new, either. The Sicilians could put in for a patent on that if it ever became legal.

But Bracken had not been hired to kill. He tensed, ready for her.

The phone call had been long-distance; he could tell by the clickings on the line.

“Mr. Bracken?”

“Yes.”

“I have word from Mr. Sills that you are available for work.”

” I could be,” Bracken answered. Benny Sills was one of several contact men who passed information from one end of a potential contract to the other, a kind of booking agent. He ran a hock-shop in a large eastern city where he also bankrolled independent smash-and-grab teams of proven reputation and sold heavy-caliber weapons to dubious political groups. “My name is Benito Torreos. Do you know it?”

“Yes.” Torreos was the right-hand man—consigliare was the word, Bracken thought - of Vito Correzente.

“Good. There is a letter for you in your hotel box, Mr. Bracken. It contains a round-trip plane ticket and a check for a thousand dollars. If you are indeed available, please take both. If not, the money is yours for calling the airport and canceling the reservation.”

“I’m available.”

“Good,” Torreos repeated. “My employer is anxious to speak to you at nine tomorrow evening, if convenient. The address is 400 Meegan Boulevard.”

“I’ll be there.

“Goodbye. Mr. Bracken.” The phone clicked.

Bracken went downstairs to get his mail.

Men who remain active and take care of themselves all their lives can remain incredibly fit even into their late years, but... there comes

a time when the clock begins to run down. Tissues fail in spite of walks, workouts, massages. The cheeks dewlap. The eyelids crenellate into wrinkled accordions. Vito Correzente had begun to enter that stage of hit life. He looked to be a well preserved seventy. Bracken put him at seventy-eight. His handshake was firm, but palsy lurked beneath, biding its time.

400 Meegan was the Graymoor Arms, and the top floor had been two \$1,000-a-month suites which Correzente had convened into a single monolith, strewn with grotesque knickknacks and Byzantine antiques. Bracken thought he could smell just a whiff of pasta and oregano.

Benny the Bull admitted him, looking like an overweight pug who had found his way into his manager's wardrobe by mistake. and he stood watchfully at the door of the sunken living room until Correzente waved him away with one driftwood hand. The door closed decorously, and Don Vittorio offered Bracken a cigar.

"No thank you."

Correzente nodded and lit one for himself. He was dressed in black pants and a white turtleneck; his hair, thick and rich and the color of iron, was brushed back elegantly. A large ruby glittered on his fourth finger.

"I want you to make a hit," he said. "I pay you t'irty t'ousan' before and twenty t'ousan' after.

"That's an agreeable price." He thought: too agreeable.

"You doan have to make no bones."

"No bones? You said a hit. A hit means I have to make bones."

Correzente smiled a wintry smile. For a moment he looked even older than seventy-eight. He looked older than all the ages. His

accent was faint, mellow, agreeable, a mere rounding of the hard English plosive and glottal stops.

“It’s my wife. I want you to rape her. Bracken waited.

“I want you to hurt her.” He smiled. One gold tooth glittered mellowly in the indirect lighting.

The story was simple, and yet there was a beautiful circularity to it which Bracken appreciated. Correzente had married Norma White because he had an itch. She had accepted his suit for the same reason. But while his itch was for her body, her bloodline, and the heat of her youth, hers was a much colder thing: money. A seamy compulsion often forces a seamy liaison, and Norma White was a compulsive gambler.

Doll Vittorio was being laughed at. It could not be borne. The matter could have been remedied simply and suddenly if he had been cuckolded by some young tony in tight pants, but to be cuckolded by his own wealth was more complex and contained a bitter irony which perhaps only a Sicilian could fully grasp. Her white Protestant family had cut her off, and so she had joined the family of Vito The Wop.

He had been one of the masters coping easily with the changes from bootleg to gambling and vice to full white-collar organization, never afraid to invest where it seemed that investiture would bring a profit, never afraid to show the iron fist inside the glove. He was a man with a belly, in the Sicilian argot.

Until now.

He had struck upon the solution because it was fitting. It was pure, object lesson, and vengeance all in one. He had chosen Bracken because he was an independent and unlike many hit men, he was neither homosexual nor impotent.

Bracken took the job.

It took him two weeks to prepare. During the first, he shadowed her for brief, unconnected periods of time, watching her go to the beauty parlor, buy dresses, play golf. She was a fine, aristocratic-looking woman with dark hair, a self-confident way of moving, and sleek body lines. He took a gestalt of her personality from the way she drove (fast, cutting in and out of traffic, jumping lights), the way she spoke (clear enunciation, Back Bay accent brooking no nonsense or waste of time), her manner of dress, a hundred other personal characteristics. When he felt that he had her fairly well ticketed, he dropped her daytime activities and concentrated on her nights, which were nearly as regular as clockwork. She left the Graymoor at seven and walked (he had never seen her take a taxi or bus) the four blocks to Jarvis's, the most opulent gambling den in the city. She always went as if dressed for a lover. She left Jarvis's promptly at ten-forty-five and walked back home. She left checks of varying amounts behind her. The pitman whom Bracken bribed said that an average week at the tables was costing Vito Correzente from eight to ten thousand dollars.

Bracken began to think that he had been bought cheaply at that.

He admired Norma Correzente in a personal yet detached way. She had found her horse and was riding him. She was not cheating or sneaking. She was an aggressive woman who was taking what she needed. There were no lies involved.

Admiration aside, he prepared to do his job. He reflected that it would be the first contract in his career where the weapon would need no getting rid of.

Now, on the bench, he felt a sudden surge of adrenaline that made his muscles tighten almost painfully. Then they relaxed and all his concentration focused in white light on the job ahead.

Her shadow trailed behind her, elongating as she left the last streetlight behind and approached the next.

She glanced at him, not in a fearful way, but with a quick appraisal that dismissed him as a pointless loiterer. When she was directly opposite him, he spoke once, sharply: "Norma."

It had the desired effect. It put her off balance. She did not reach immediately for her purse, where she carried a caliber pistol of Swedish make.

He came off the bench in an explosion. One moment he slouched, a sleepy head lost in a heroin haze. The next he had hooked a hard arm around her throat, choking the yell (not a scream; not her) in her throat. He pulled her off the sidewalk. Her purse dropped and he kicked it into darkness. A pencil, a notebook, the pistol, and a few Kleenex spilled from it. She tried to knee his crotch and he turned his thigh muscle into it. One hand raked his cheek. He had bent the other back and away.

Bushes. The night breeze made faint nets of shadow through them. He tripped her and she went down behind them, sprawled in the grass and gum wrappers.

When he came down on top she met him with a fist. The birthstone ring she wore gouged the bridge of his nose, bringing blood.

He yanked her skin up. The inner lining ripped. No girdle. Thank God.

She brought her heel down on the muscle of his calf and he let out a grunt. A rabbit punch caught him. He drove his fist into the softness of her belly and she wheezed her breath out. Her mouth opened, not to cry out but to find air, and her shadowed face was an unreal map of eye and lip and plane of cheek. He tore at her underpants, missed his grip, tore at them again. They stretched but didn't give.

Fists, feet. She was hammering at him, not trying to yell anymore, saving her breath. He tried to get her chin with his left and she slipped the punch. Her dark hair was a fan on the grass. She bit his

neck like a dog, going for the big vein there. He brought his knee up and her intake of breath became a small shriek.

He grabbed her pants again and this time there was a pop as the waistband let go. She almost scratched her way out from under and he drove the top of his head into the shelf of her chin. There was an ivory click as her teeth came together. Her body went slack and he jackknifed atop her. breathing in great lurches .

She was shamming. Both hands came down in a clap, catching his ears squarely between them. Red pain exploded in his head, and for the first time, he felt the strain of emotion while doing a job. He butted her savagely, and again.

This time she was not playing possum. Blood trickled slowly from one white nostril. He raped her.

He had thought her unconscious, but when he finished he saw her looking up at him in the dark. One of her eyes was rapidly puffing shut. Her clothes were tattered. Not that he had come out so well; his entire body felt raw and frayed.

“I am told to tell you that this is how your husband pays a debt to his honor. I am told to tell you that he is a man with a belly. I am told to tell you that all debts are paid and there is honor again.”

He spoke expressionlessly. His contract was fulfilled. He got up on one knee, warily, then gained his feet. The cop would be by in seven minutes. It was time to be gone. Her one open eye glittered up at him in the dark, a pirate's gem.

Site said one word: “Wait.”

Her second apartment, the one not even Benny Torreos knew about, was a walk-down nine blocks away. Bracken had given her his coat to hide her tom dress. They had only one exchange of conversation during the walk.

“I will give you twice what my husband paid you if you will do a job for me. “

“No. You don’t have the money, and I have never crossed an employer. It’s bad for business.”

“I have the money. Not from him. From my family. And I don’t want you to kill him.”

Bracken said sardonically: “Rape is out. “

She found her apartment key after a hunt through her jumbled purse and let him in. The living room was done in varying, tasteful shades of green, a low-slung, modern decor that avoided the livid tastelessness of many trusting places. The only clashing, aggressive note was an impressionistic painting of a huge, canted roulette wheel which was hung over the lime-colored couch. It was done in hectic shades of red.

She crossed beneath it, reached into the next room, and turned on “light”. There was a round bed with the covers turned back. When he walked through he saw that there were a number of mirrors,

She dropped his coat and stood in the ragged remnants of her dress. One rose-tinted nipple, dumbly erotic, peeped through shattered chiffon.

“Now, she said calmly, “we’ll do it in a civilized way.

After, in the time of talking, she poured out her virulence toward the man she had married. There was a restful rise and fall to the cadence of her curses, and Bracken listened contentedly enough, poised on the dark knife-edge of sleep.

He was a wop, a stinking spic, a lover of sheep, a crude bludgeoner who went to chic restaurants and ate pie with his fingers; a grabber and a twister, a black-and-bluer of flesh; a lover of junk shop gimcracks; an aficionado of Norman Rockwell; a pederast; a man

who would not treat her as a diadem but rather as a brace for his sagging manhood; not as a proud woman but as a dirty backstain joke to bolster the admiration of his pasta-eating, sweaty associates.

“A man with a belly,” she whispered into the darkness just before Bracken dropped off “I am his belly. I am his guts. I am his honor.” It occurred to him, as his mind fled to sleep, that the conflict of their honor had formed a bridge of hate between them that he now walked on, across oceans of darkness.

While they sat in the breakfast nook the following morning, eating doughnuts and watching legs pass in the tiny window above, she made her proposition: “Make me pregnant. I will pay you to do this.”

Bracken put down his doughnut and looked at her.

She smiled and brushed her hair back. “He wants a child. Could he make one?” She shrugged. “Perhaps lasagna is good for potency. I, however, take pills. He knows I take them.”

Bracken sipped his coffee. “Stud service?”

Norma laughed, a tinkly sound. “I suppose. I go to him today. No makeup. Black eye. Scratched face. Tears. How ! wish to be a good wife.” The, black charring note of score began to creep in. “How I want to learn the recipe for his favorite greasy noodles. How I want to give him a son.”

Her Face had become alive, lovely. “He will be prideful and forgiving... in short, blind. I’ll get what I want, which is freedom of the tables. And he will get what he want!: which is an heir.

“Perhaps not” She was lying, and when she looked into his eyes she saw his knowledge and smiled with slow, shy guile. “And perhaps, at the right time, I will kill him with the truth.”

“You won’t tell him?”

“Would it kill him?” Bracken leaned forward with mild professional interest.

“If. someone cut open your belly, would it kill you?”

“It would cost one hundred thousand dollars, Bracken said. “Forty before conception and sixty after. Have you got that kind of money?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “All right.” He paused. “It’s a funny hit, you know that? A funny hit.”

She laughed.

He returned to the Graymoor that afternoon and collected the rest of his money. Correzente was smiling and robust.

Bracken was thanked profusely. More business would be thrown his way. Bracken nodded, and Correzente leaned toward him in a fatherly way.

“Can you keep your mouth shut about all this?”

“I always keep my mouth shut.” Bracken said, and left.

Benny the Bull gave him a handshake and an envelope containing a plane ticket to Cleveland. Once there, Bracken bought a used car and drove back.

He took up residence in Norma Correzente’s second apartment. She brought him a carton of paperback novels. He read them and watched old movies on TV. He did not go out even when it would have been safe to go out. They made sex regularly. It was like being in a very plush jail. Ten weeks after the contract with Dan Vittorio had, been fulfilled, she killed the rabbit.

Bracken left town again.

He was in Palm Springs, and the phone connection was very bad.

“Mr. Bracken?”

“Yes. Talk louder, please.” Bracken was dressed in sweaty tennis whites; the girl on the bed wore only her skin. Tennis racket dangled from one hand. She swished at the air with it idly watching Bracken with the nearly expressionless eyes of experienced desire.

“This is Benito Torreos, Mr. Bracken.

“Yes. “

“You did a job for my Don seven months ago. You remember?”

“Yes.” New sweat began to crawl down his back.

“He wants to see you. He’s dying.”

Bracken thought carefully, knowing his life almost certainly depended on his next words. He did not see what he had done as a double-cross: he had fulfilled two separate and exclusive contracts, and had been able to vacation from then until now on his earnings. But the old man would see it as a cross, a stain on his pride and good faith. He was a man with a belly.

“Why does he want to see me?”

“To ask a question.”

The connection was very bad, and Bracken knew that to simply replace the instrument in its cradle would likely mean death. The family has a long arm. It was either to go Vito or run, and the connection was very bad.

“How is Mrs. Correzente?” He asked politely.

“Dead,” Benny Torreos said flatly. “She died last month, in childbirth.”

The bedroom was gothic shades of white on white - rug, walls, ceiling, curtains, even the sky beyond the windows. A steady drizzle was falling outside the Graymoor. Don Vito, shrunken to the size of a jockey twisted from the back of his horse, lay immured in his deathbed, which was also white.

He lifted one hand to Bracken. It shook briefly in the air, then dropped to the snowy coverlet again. There was a soft click as Torreo left them, closing the door to rejoin the relatives in the front room. The women out there were dressed in black, and shawled. Even the business suits of their men seemed old fashioned, as if death had dragged Sicily back into the fabric of the clothes and of the wearers by force.

Bracken went to the bed. The old man's face had fallen away to a skull. There was a sour smell that seemed to come from the folds of his flesh. His mouth had been twisted down cruelly on the left side, and the left hand was claw-fingered and frozen.

"Bracken," Correzente said. His voice was blurred and cottony. The operative side of his face lifted in a grotesque smile while the other side remained impassive. "I must tell you."

"Benny said you had a question."

"Yes." The word came out yeth. "But I must... tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"They told me you did a good job. You do. You have killed my wife and me."

"I did my job."

"Pride", the old man said, and smiled apologetically. "Pride ...

He seemed to gather himself. "She promised to be a good wife, a dutiful wife. She said she had been taking pills but these pills were

no more. She said she would bear me a son.

“We made love together. But I am old. She asked if it was too much for me.” The skull smile again. “Should I tell my chastened wife that I am no more a man? No, I say. No too much.

“We make love more. And I, I have a stroke. A little blood vessel up here” — he tapped his head gravely— “goes pop, like a balloon. The doctor comes and says, No more, Vito. You will kill yourself. And I say, yes, more. Until I have put a child in her.”

“Pride ...

“Then the doctor say, You have done this. You have made a baby at seventy-eight. He say, I would give you a cigar, Vito, but you must smoke no more cigars. “

Bracken shifted his legs. The whiteness of the room was oppressive, creeping.

“I am overjoyed. I am a man, much man. I have a belly. The house is filled with my family. We have, oh, the word is for much food -”

“Banquet,” Bracken said.

“Yes. and I sit at the head of the table, then rise. My wife, she rises. I toast her with wine and tell them. I say, I have given my belly to my wife!” “I am the happiness of the world. I am beyond laughings and dirty jokes. I give her money for the wheels and tables. I give her what she wants. Then one night, we argue. Much hard words pass. And then ... I have this. Pain. One eye goes blind. She saw it and screamed. She runs for the telephone in the living room with her belly before her. I try to call but am down a dark hole. when I wake up, they tell me she has fallen on the steps going down from hen to the living room. They tell me she is in the hospital. Then they tell me ... ” The hand rose again. “Fut.” Don Vito said. The dreadful smile came and went.

Correzente was visibly tired now. His eyes closed, then opened slowly, as if weighted.

“You see?” he whispered. “The irony?”

“Benny said you had a question.” Bracken said.

The dead face looked up at him steadily. “The baby lives,” he said. “They tell me this. In a glass house.”

“Incubator.”

“They say the baby has pretty blue eyes.

Bracken said nothing.

“You made one of Norma’s eyes black. But they were brown. And then is no blue-eyed Sicilian.”

“Benny said you had a question,” Bracken said.

“I have ask my question. My doctor say, it’s genes. I do not know genes. I only know what a dying man lies in bed and thinks. How she was prideful and how she could wait.”

Bracken looked down at him, his mind a thousand miles away. He thought of the blonde, how she served, the brown flesh of her legs below the blinding white of her skirt, the flickering glimpse of her panties, the fan of her hair on the pillow, her trained tennis muscles.

“How stupid you are,” he said to the old man, softly. He leaned forward, breathing in the scent of Correzente’s doom. “Death has made you senile. I have my own belly. Do you think I would take my own leavings?”

A line of spittle was making a slow trek down from the corner of the old man’s mouth to his chin.

“The baby’s eyes will go brown. Too bad you won’t see it. Goodbye, stupid old man.” He got up. The room was white and full of death. He left and went back to Palm Springs.