

SPRING-BLADE KNIFE

By Yasuko Thanh

(excerpt)

It's a funny thing, to know the exact date of your death. I've known it for six months, since my sentencing, and hardly a minute goes by I don't remember it. That was also the day I was segregated from general population and moved from South Wing to one of these isolation cells. I was left alone twenty-three hours a day, but I got two hours outside on Mondays and Thursdays, in a plotted-off pen, where I could jog in a circle and breathe air that smelled like apples and manure from the work yard. They don't put prisoners who've been sentenced to death back into population; it's bad for morale, one of the guards told me.

From my cell, all I could hear were the tread of the guards' boots on the tier, the clink of their keys in the steel doors, the voices of other inmates whispering or weeping. Then, two days ago, I got moved to this countdown chamber: six feet by nine feet, with a mattress and a toilet, where I can only hear the protestors outside. This is where I'll be until tomorrow, June 2, 1948, when I hang.

My name is Mose Donato De Luca and I'm seventeen steps from the gallows. I was named after my grandfather, though The Stranglers called me Doc. My mother calls me Donny. The newspapers have called me a lot of things: a hooligan, a drag-racing punk, and a few other names that aren't worth repeating. But two days ago, Reverend Joseph called me friend as he helped me pack up my things for the move to this last holding cell.

He helped me peel off the walls some sketches I'd made during that time in segregation. I'd drawn the rods outside the Burger Joint: louvered hoods and whacked grilles, headlights streamlined into the fenders, paint and clean sheet metal, all sweetness and light. I'd drawn pictures from my childhood, things I remembered, my old slot cars, our first dog, Crusty. The books that needed to be returned to the prison library, the reverend and I stacked in a corner of the cell. Talking to him eased my mind, like always. The only thing the reverend and I didn't pack was my Bible. Before Reverend Joseph left, he gave me a medallion, a cross with a circle underneath, and inside the circle were two horizontal lines. I turned the medallion over in my hand and rubbed the bars.

"It means all people are equal," he said, "in God's eyes."

The metal felt cold against my skin. "Equal, huh? Are you sure? I've never seen a millionaire on death row."

But his words got stuck in my head. That night I kept thinking about God's love washing over all men equally. When I still lived in South Wing, before I was sentenced, I was surrounded by other men awaiting trial. Some of them had only gone to school up to grade three or had stolen their first car at eight or lived on their own since twelve, working the ice rackets or down on the waterfront. I felt guilty around them for having a house and a family. They'd never had a choice and I'd chosen to be a criminal.

I wrote letters for them. They gave me their words for their mothers, or kids, or girlfriends. I read to those who couldn't read and just needed to hear a story, any story, about a

blonde, a hot rod, a getaway with a robber to cheer for. I even read some of them scripture, and often enough they started calling me Mr. Bible when they saw me coming down the tier.

The only thing that maybe makes men equal in prison is the limbo we're all in, all of us waiting. It makes me think that maybe hell isn't always a place. Maybe it's a way of feeling right here on earth.

My family wasn't rich, but we were a family like any other. My parents had come from Italy in the late 1920s, right before I was born, and like most immigrants our house wasn't a mansion by any stretch of the imagination. We had oilcloth floors and floral wallpaper. Before the house on King Edward, we lived on Union Street in Strathcona, not far from Commercial Drive.

No rich people ever lived in Strathcona. None of its people ever made it into the papers for anything good. We lived near the Bancos, the Brunos, the Maltempis. It was as if everyone wanted to find a new life on our east-end Vancouver street. My father worked at a restaurant sixty hours a week, saved his money, and tried to teach us what it meant to work hard for something. But every night he'd come home dead tired and fall into his ratty arm chair. Mom would wait up for him, keeping his dinner plate warm, though sometimes he didn't eat dinner at all because he'd already be asleep with his shoes still on in front of the radio. I'd watch her turning the tuning knob with sadness in her eyes, heaviness in her shuffle as she moved across the room to light a lamp.

I ignored what my dad tried to teach me and instead taught myself how to slip a lock jimmy in between the rubber of a window and a car door, pry the ring off an ignition housing, and cross two terminals to crank an engine. Sometimes a man would hire me to steal a car for twenty-five dollars a pop or sometimes I stole for myself – radio antennas, hubcaps, tires – and sold the parts to dealers and junkies. I didn't steal for the money alone, but for the feel of speed, racing down the road at night, weightless and free. When I smelled the burning rubber, saw the smoke in the rear view, gone was the weight of a life that would steamroll me to a stop. The load flew off me and away during an eighty-mile-an-hour roll.

When I got caught with that first stolen car, my case worker tried to scare me. She said that I was a communist, that Senator Tom Reid thought I was a communist, and that I was going to get two years for hanging out with a gang that had been seen at Party recruitment drives.

"What?" I said. "Call me a dunce. I might not know much about politics, but listen: no Strangler was ever a pinko."

When she didn't shame me straight, the Youth Guidance Division threatened me with twenty months in the Boys' Industrial School. That didn't change my mind about stealing cars either. What nobody understood was that back then I would have done any length of time in prison for my gang. That was years ago, now.

When Culos, Morton, and I hung out, we weren't political. We'd drink espresso shots in Cafe Pingado or go to Ten Pin Alley to bowl or shoot pool at Rocco's. When we were bored, we made gas-pipe blackjacks or wooden clubs or chain knuckle dusters. I'd sit around in a rented room for hours just throwing a spring-blade knife against a wall.

"I got so good I could pin a poker chip at fifteen paces," I told Reverend Joseph, not bragging, but just to show him how I junked my time.

My gang, the Main Street Stranglers, hung around Little Italy on Commercial Drive. We weren't as big a gang as the Capones, our allies, who could fill the entire Burger Joint, but we had a reputation for being tough and I was one of the meanest fighters. "No one gets hurt," was my motto. I was ready to bleed for any Strangler in trouble and every Strangler knew it. But I

was crazy enough to fart on demand and had a girlfriend who left me for it, too. Hell, I'd go into a department store and walk out wearing a lampshade on my head if it would give everybody a kick.

On weekends, five or six of us might pile into Culos's hopped-up '32, the one we made from stolen parts hammered together in the hangar on Hastings Street. Maybe three or four other Strangler cars would join us. We'd drive around the community centre looking for our buddies, the Vic Gang, whose territory staked around Victoria Drive, or we'd cruise Broadway looking for our enemies, the Alma Dukes, to wise off, or rumble, or challenge to a drag race.

That night the setting sun shone in the windshield and I tilted my face toward it, to get the last of the heat. Culos was driving, with Morton and Little Nicky in the back.

"We should get some girls," Little Nicky said. He was the youngest of us all, turning fourteen that night, and ready for some fun.

"You know what to do with them?" Morton asked.

"Don't tease the kid," I said.

"More'n you," Little Nicky replied.

"Yeah?" Morton said. "What do you do with them?"

"Look at those eyes," Culos said. "He's a pretty boy. The girls think he's cherry. They know what to do with him."

Saturday night, The Burger Joint would be hopping with girls from the high school who liked leather jackets, and with boys who pretended, a toothpick in their mouth, their eyes half-closed. Not everyone was in a gang, but everyone came knowing something could happen. The electricity in the air tanked you high, like we were tanked full.

Culos had filched some loganberry wine from his parents. We felt good. We felt so good, Morton lit a joint and passed it to me. I took a sharp drag and held the smoke in my lungs.

I turned the radio on and leaned back. Culos stretched one arm over his head and said, "So. Blond or brunette?"

When Morton and Culos talked, their voices sounded like they were coming through a tunnel. It was so funny I laughed. Then I coughed. My eyes watered. Morton said you've got to cough to get off. I passed the joint to Little Nicky, still coughing. Little Nicky passed it to Morton. Morton passed it back to me.

That night the Alma Dukes were there, too, the boys parked on the street and peacocking in front of their rods. Culos, Morton, and I strolled passed them in white buckskin shoes we'd bought on Granville Street in a store where all the hepcats spent their money. For weeks, we'd been admiring those shoes in the window. "Aren't those zoomy," we'd say when we walked past. We liked to look good, all three of us – I had on an oversized fedora with a wide pinstriped brim and my long, white fingertip jacket – and I guess I was strutting when we passed those Alma Dukes.

Culos slicked back the sides of his greased hair with a comb that he kept in his back pocket. He looked good and I wanted to look good too and I thought after we'd had some fun I'd go down to Modernize, the Chinese tailor shop, maybe even put down a deposit on a new pair of strides.

"Boys. Hey, boys," an Alma Duke with one green eye and one brown one said. He looked down at our shoes. "A little bit jazzy, don't you think?"

"Jazzy? No, I don't think so," I said. I turned to Culos. "Do you? Think they're too jazzy?"

Culos said, "What did he say? Did he just say something to us?"

“I said, did you boys just walk through some flour?”

“Nope, he didn’t say nothing,” I said and kept walking toward the door.

“If you don’t speak up,” Culos said, “I’m going to whomp you.”

“I repeat,” he said, “did you boys just walk through some flour?”

Culos grabbed him. He held onto his jacket and shook him up and down like a sack of potatoes a few times. Then he threw him to the ground and kicked him before he had a chance to get up. Girls came running out to watch. Other boys jumped in.

Fighting made me feel the same way driving fast did – free. I know the others felt it, too, the ones that watched and imagined themselves throwing punches, maybe hitting someone right between the eyes or on that button in the chin with an energetic clip. You could tell they wanted that kind of clean satisfaction, their eyes fairly shone like jewels with the hope and desire of it.

When I glanced up, Culos, sitting on the ground against the curb, catching his breath, winked at me.

Morton was standing in the centre of the tornado and looking around, like he was deciding who to punch next.

Then suddenly I went down and someone in an Alma Duke’s jacket was standing over me saying, “You ready for more?”

I tried to stand up but fell down, dizzy. The other guy watched me try to regain my footing. “Come on, buddy. You want?”

“Bastard,” I said.

Somehow I got up and we stumbled and kept fighting, along with the rest of the kids who were spilling out the doors. Before it was over, there were more than thirty of us in front of the Burger Joint, everyone punching and biting and spitting, even the girls. Some houses faced the street and an old guy had come out of one of the doorways. He reminded me of my dad and I still get a chill remembering how he looked as he walked around in his pyjamas, the twinge in his voice as he asked us if we’d seen his son. He just kept saying, “I’m looking for my son,” over and over, walking around between the fighters, looking lost. I wonder to this day if he ever found him.

Little Nicky had just joined the Stranglers and we wanted to show him a good time. It didn’t go that way. Someone pulled a knife.

I saw some kids run to the circle of alder trees next to the parking lot. They waited, watching from there.

Then I heard a kind of wavy “Ooooooh” go up from the crowd, kind of rise up from the tops of their heads and then go back down again to the pavement.

Culos and Morton were crouched down beside Little Nicky. “This is no good, Doc, this is no good,” Morton said. “It was one of the Alma Dukes.”

Culos had his hand over the hole in Little Nicky’s chest, but was having a hard time stopping the blood because Nicky was thrashing around so much. I looked down at Little Nicky lying on the pavement in a pool of blood that was growing beneath his body. A girl put her hand over her mouth and threw up between her fingers. The blood pool quickly spread and suddenly we were standing in it, red staining our white shoes.

Red bubbles were coming from Nicky’s lips. The sound of the bubbles was strange, especially mixed in with his moaning.

“Little Nicky,” I said, bending down. “Who did this? Who pulled a goddamn knife?”

His thrashing became shaking and then the shaking stopped.

We heard the sirens. They couldn't be very far away, and grew louder by the second, piercing the sound of the crowd that had gathered around Little Nicky, encircling him. The yelling, crying, and shouting stopped as everyone looked at each other, deciding what to do. I knew what they were thinking because I thought it, too. Surely an ambulance was among those sirens. We took one last look at Nicky and ran. We ran when we heard the police sirens, but I couldn't get Little Nicky out of my mind, lying in the parking lot.

He spent two weeks in St. Paul's intensive care before going home on a ventilator, with a crackle in his chest whenever he breathed.

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