

## **The Extortionist**

**by H. W. Moss**

The subway has an odor distinctly different from death, which stinks. The Metro smells of electricity and diesel and is noisy as rolling thunder.

Death is quiet. Usually, death smells of urine because the bladder muscles relax. Sometimes it smells like shit, depending on whether or not the person used the toilet recently or got gut shot which can spill feces out the wound.

We see both the Metro and death daily, but we don't play good cop, bad cop, Rico and me. Rico outweighs me by a hundred easy. How he passes his physical every year is beyond me. "I want to be the skinny cop for a change," he says as we wait outside a turnstile beneath Kings Highway, the Brighton Beach area. Yesterday we worked Bed-Stuy, tomorrow Coney Island, but we never work Manhattan because we're Brooklyn cops and, like the man said, there's nobody livin' what knows Brooklyn t'roo an' t'roo.

Other side of the entrance where we cannot see them and they cannot see us, we hear a woman's voice say, "Let me come through with you and save two dollars." The couple pops out the other side of the silver lacey fingers of the tollgate with smiles on their faces that turn to surprise, fright, then anger and perhaps disgust as we introduce ourselves.

"Pardon me," I say as the two walk right into us. "We're New York police officers and we want to talk to you about jumping the turnstile."

Which is an anachronism if ever I heard one, like calling a music store a record store when there are no records inside. Besides, you can't jump this type anymore

because they're up to the ceiling. But you can double up and walk through which is what this duo did.

The girl, a not bad looking blonde, says, "You're kidding, right?" She was the one to react, not her partner who simply stood where we put him, mouth shut. But the blonde. Sheesh.

I have to admit we did not look the part: Rico in short sleeve Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts resembles Bill Clinton jogging, the pasty white skin of his legs sticking out. Me in jeans and work shirt. It's hot and humid underground, they didn't dig the tunnels deep enough to keep naturally cool, and the only reason I'm not dripping is we been waiting on the passenger platform for just this type of fare fraud. Rico goes, "Would you step over here with us? Right, up against this wall here. Don't move."

The blonde makes like she might run. I stand in the way of where she has to go since she is not about to drop to the tracks and try and leap the third rail and they just came in an exit on this side which means she only has one way to escape and would bump into me if she tried anything. She didn't, but she wouldn't shut up, either.

She says, "This is a joke, right?" Then she sees the badges we pull out that hang around our necks under the shirts and goes all Florence Nightingale on us. "It's my fault, not his. Come on. I'm the one who came through with him, so why don't you let him go? I'll take full responsibility."

Rico was ready with his hand inside his pouch where he keeps his Smith & Wesson semiautomatic Military and Police Pistol. Me, I like the two inch barrel M & P .38 revolver. Easier to conceal, easier to retrieve.

Rico says, “We’re writing you up, but I have two questions you must answer truthfully. First, have you ever received a citation for beating a fare?”

They say, “No,” in unison.

“Second, have either of you any outstanding warrants?”

Negative.

I have my pad out and am telling the blonde to produce identification, ask if this is her current address, the essentials. A train on a really bad track joint comes into the station as she answers. Her voice rises, then the train halts and silence ensues, but she’s still talking and I say, “Why are you shouting?”

That shuts her up. I write slowly, deliberately, on a Transit Adjudication Bureau notice of violation and hearing form. She gives me her phone number, her social security number, I check the first box, “Entered without payment,” a violation of Section 21, 4(a) explaining in writing, “Doubled up w/ another at Kings Highway station avoiding legal payment of fare in the NYC subway.” That’ll cost \$60 each to beat a two dollar fare. I check that box and explain she can appear in person to contest the citation or mail a check. “You have thirty days to take care of it. Otherwise, a warrant for your arrest will be issued.”

I haven’t been paying attention to Rico who’s on the walkie talkie, something about nearest officers respond.

I ask the man who has stood tight lipped throughout for his ID, begin filling out the form, when Rico says to me, “Got a ten seventy-one upstairs. We gotta go.”

That means I quit what I'm doing immediately, but I'm only half way through with this guy's tag, so I tell him, "Wait here until I get back. Unnerstand?" Guy nods, I pocket his ID just in case and tell the girl, "You're free to go. He isn't."

Rico and I pull out all the stops and run toward the exit side of the platform. It's hot and we're running and the humidity is near ninety percent so naturally I'm breaking out in sweat when we pound our way up the steps, must a been forty of them, taking them two at a time until we're outside in Little Odessa and in broad daylight on the sidewalk looking for an address dispatch gave Rico.

The area was once very Jewish. Now it's ethnic Russian and every store, shop and seamstress is a study in Cyrillic.

The address is on our block, about half way down the crowded sidewalk, a large Russian grocery. The place is air conditioned, a tremendous relief. We enter and on our left is fresh pastry, cakes and breads, on the right a long row of meat and fowl, some cooked but mostly not, plates of baked quail, stuffed breaded chicken breast on a stick and there at the end of the counter are the fish behind the glass staring blankly at us, dead eyes on ice beds, fresh fish, eviscerated dried and smoked fish, fish in vacuum packs from Moscow and then, near the cashiers, the processed meats and blocks of packaged cheese which the girls behind the counter wearing their hair like 50's female movie stars stand eager and ready to slice and package and send any of this home with you.

I show my badge to a counter clerk, ask for the manager, say there's been a report of an incident. I don't want to cause a riot in a crowd so I say nothing about it being a shooting. He points to a doorway in the back where the shelves are stacked to the ceiling

with pickled vegetables of every kind in glass jars of all sizes. We pass through looking for a fight, our guns concealed but within easy reach.

A panicky fat guy wearing a three piece suit pumping down the hallway stops when he sees us, tries to act nonchalant which is a dead giveaway something's up.

“New York City police officers responding to a call, sir,” Rico says all polite but firm. “Who are you?”

His accent is thick like he was raised far from America. “Eees in here,” he tells us as his face flushes with either the running or the situation. A door leads to a banquet room which is elegant the way a movie set in 19th Century Czarist Russia is luxurious with baroque style candelabras on an ornate table with place settings for ten. There are four adults dressed to the nines in the room and two children, sweet looking little girls in pinafores, one of them holding a golden haired doll tight against her breast. One of the adults has a hand on his arm which I realize is bleeding, the red dripping out his cuff and pooling on the floor. There is silence. No words are exchanged as eyes meet all around the room.

We identify ourselves and I ask if an ambulance has been called.

“Yes,” a woman responds. “I also called the police.” She holds up a cell phone by way of explanation.

Rico says, “Can someone tell us what happened here?”

One of the little girls starts crying. She can't be six.

“Her father is dead,” the woman says and points out the body slumped seated against the far wall.

A man rises from behind a large high back chair where we have not noticed him until now.

“So is her mother,” he says tersely.

I ask the man with the wounded arm to take a seat and remove his suit coat. He complies and I see the sleeve is slick with blood at the shoulder.

“That’s a gunshot wound, isn’t it?”

He nods assent.

“What’s your name?”

He does not reply, stubbornly holding his good hand against the torn flesh to staunch the blood flow. I can see his life isn’t threatened, but it could turn that way if he doesn’t get immediate medical attention.

“Listen, tough guy. I’m a cop and there’s three victims and you’re the only one of them who can talk. Now, what’s your name?”

It looked like he was going to defy me right up to the instant I put cuffs on him, no matter what wounds he had, when the woman said, “His name’s Johnny. Johnny The Gent.”

“That may be his middle name, what’s his last name?” Rico asked with his note pad in hand no longer worried about needing his piece.

She shrugged and said, “I don’t know. I’m not sure anybody but him knows. We call him The Gent. He’s Johnny The Gent.”

The little girl with the doll said, “That’s my daddy. My name is Molly Ringer. His name is Johnny Ringer.”

Sirens began wailing outside the building, ambulance or more police we did not yet know and still a few minutes away.

“You his wife?”

“Girlfriend. Former girlfriend,” the woman added looking straight at the dead guy as if this was how she gave him the news.

Rico walked over to the dead man on the floor. “White male, thirties, knife sticking in his chest indicates he died of heart failure.” Rico kicked his shoe against the dead man’s hand and moved a pistol on the carpet a few feet away. He bent over the other body. “White female also in her thirties, has a gunshot wound in her forehead.”

“All right, I’m going to ask one more time. What happened here?” I pointed at the woman who had told us the wounded man’s name. “You. Give me your name and explain who these people are and how this happened.”

“It’s all that brat’s fault,” she said pointing at the other little girl, the one without a doll.

“How d’ya mean?” Rico prompted.

“She wanted a dolly like Angel there,” indicating Molly and her childish treasure. I could not fathom how two people could die and a third be wounded over a coveted toy.

“Yah, so?” Rico was getting impatient, I could tell.

“We were gathered for a birthday dinner, the room was noisy. That brat saw Molly’s doll and told Rada her mother she wanted one just like it.”

Rico said, “Slow down. I’m taking notes. Then what happened?”

I could hear the sirens right outside now. They would be here in seconds. I hoped the woman would hurry up and finish.

“Her mother was not about to buy an expensive toy like that and told the kid no.”

Expectant silence surrounded us, but neither Rico nor I prompted the witness any further.

“Just then the room went quiet and everyone heard what she said to her mother.”

Rico paused with pen above pad.

“She said, ‘If you don’t buy me a dolly like that, I’m going to tell daddy I saw you kissing Johnny’s pee-pee.’”

Clearly, dad was packing, probably Russian mafia, and took this insult none too gracefully. He pulled his gun and shot his wife dead. Then he turned toward The Gent who was also probably mob connected but whose choice of weapon was the K-Bar sticking out of the dead guy. Dad must have got off another round while he was dying, but cold steel has a way of ruining your aim, which is why Johnny had a shoulder, not a chest wound.

I felt sorry for the kid, trying to extort her mother only to have to pay a higher price than turnstile jumpers. Just then the paramedics arrived and began treating the knife thrower. Our uniforms were in close pursuit.

I learned later the child went to foster care because there were no family members in the country and everyone back home seemed to know the story of how her parents died. No one wanted to take in an extortionist.

Never did go back and find the guy on the platform. Desk sent his ID back by mail along with the completed citation.

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