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NON-FICTION

MANICOTTI AT THREE A.M.

She loved the way he dressed: the expensive athletic pants with broad white stripes down the side, the jet black tee-shirt over his bulging chest, the tiny gold boxing glove dangling around his neck, the \$9000 gold watch, the cute little

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tfits on them, his swagger, his savvy, his sneakers, of, well, softness around round-faced Winnie n as an ex-bonebreaker who took no lip, a heavy-g gym every day. Laurie just couldn't control rane operator sauntered into view. What else did

she like? His generosity! For the Giver hadn't achieved reknown in the building trades by accident. He seemed driven by a demon of personal justice, always pushing a boss out of a privileged parking spot, flying hither and yon to salvage a reckless but deserving pal from ruin, standing up for the oppressed, or showing a lady a grand time. She had to have him.

But for Laurie Shannon Pollock, a sizzling tossout from Aspen High come east of the Rockies to Manhattan and moving fast, there were obstacles. Could she extract love from his hard hat heart? Would he ever turn those kindly bassett hound eyes upon her in rapture? Was it possible to kiss him loose from the thrall-dom of Brooklyn nightlife? Her mind was in turbulence. Seated at a rear table in a bar across from the Portman Hotel construction site, on West 46th and Broadway, where they both toiled, she watched him laughing with his friends. His laughter made her feel needy and full all at once. As field secretary for the huge job, Laurie shuttled commands all day among crews of bosses, foremen, and laborers. As a premier tower rig engineer, always the most important worker on a building site, Vinnie Billi hoisted two thousand pound concrete slabs high in the air, poured concrete, lifted steel. She was indoors. He was outdoors. She was nineteen. He was thirty-seven. She made a so-so salary. He banged out a shockingly strong dollar. But whenever Laurie saw Vinnie in the bar the big man's eyes roved above and beyond her. Unused to such treatment from Manhattan males, Laurie was in a dither. She blamed it on the borough beyond bridge and tunnel.

"Brooklyn is the weirdest place on earth," she complained to a girlfriend from work. "It's no wonder they've got a different area code. In some neighborhoods

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cks are sinking! And most guys from there are arro-
cept for the sweet Vinnie Billi, of course, who acts
d. So how do I get his attention? By tattooing
o in Bath Beach?"

"You've become a typical Manhattan snob," chastised her girlfriend. "You can't be a snob with Brooklyn ^{men} guys. They don't go for stuffed shirts. You may get Vinnie out of Brooklyn but you'll never get the Brooklyn out of Vinnie. Those guys never change. Accept him like he is and bide your time."

"I'll nab him. But accept the Brooklyn Italian 'Guido Ego' lording over me?"

No way!" exclaimed Laurie Shannon Pollock, the kind of lass who ~~bebelled~~ against nuances of male domination even in undercooked lamb chops. Who could blame her? She had moved to a City which had recently become a kind of temple for modern young women to worship themselves. Free! Beautiful! Powerful! Female! Frustrated! Laurie, a restless conquorette, had cut a ~~wwath~~ through legions of boyish strivers pineing for her gorgeous face with the flawless complexion, her twinkling breasts, her long poney legs, and the wit she used to slash them until they shivered with embarrassed glee. The little punks left her dry. She wondered whether Manhattan was nothing but a campus for cocaine-addicted financial stars, women weight lifters, and wimps who preened like models. Where were the men? Where were the animals?

Laurie was a nightbird. In popular clubs like Area, the Palladium, and Kamikaze, their tone set by androgynous softies, girls with imitation male egos, and jerks from Europe, she became a dancing starfish, spraying libidinal sparks in the dark. But even there, on glamor ground zero, among the enviable and the arrived, something was missing. Something rough, startling, dangerous. Something masculine. She made forays down to the revitalized Lower East Side, watching on the bar of the Pyramid Club and making friends with her. Impotent juveniles! Laurie became disturbed. Why did so many guys in the Rockies to get off? Why did so many guys in New York, like they came straight from the Bellevue shock treatment spots -- God forbid! -- elsewhere than on this piece of overpriced real estate bounded by the Battery and Harlem? It was a terrifying concept. As her obsession with the crane operator increased, she began to have nightmares of traveling to Brooklyn from Manhattan and not being able to get back! Perhaps, she despaired, it was time to resume dateing condo hustlers in white dinner jackets and penny loafers. Well, not quite yet.

"I've cursed myself a million times for not being into cocaine," said Laurie to Vinnie as she sidled up beside him at the bar. "It makes my social life very limited."

Vinnie, who had left the realm of pollution behind for one of perpetual martial training, sniffed her cigarette with disdain. "But there's more than enough time for cancer, right?"

"Why am I so happy to see you?" asked Laurie.

"Because you're lonely," replied Vinnie.

She withstood these reffuffs and kept up the pressure until the day she saw Vinnie acting strange in the bar. He was wearing a dungaree shirt with red buttons, a red bandana, and snakeskin cowboy boots under black jeans. He wouldn't talk or look at her. Then, on the way to the bathroom, he suddenly pinned her to the wall with two strong arms and let fly. The kiss had marvelous effects. Laurie had to buy a bigger brassiere. Laurie stopped seeing her trendy friends. Laurie was madly in love. But a month of nothing wonderful followed until the night ~~he~~ ^{he} had to work a double shift on the crane. For 13 hours straight Laurie hung around the teamster's shanty playing Monopoly until, when the clock struck midnight, she popped a pair of gold heart-shaped earring into those pale

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head and took the rickety ⁺ outside elevator to the Manhattan Hotel. Then she crossed the roof to the building the ladder to where Vinnie was running the

It was dark and windy. Her palms began to sweat on every metal rung of the ladder. Below her the Times Square traffic looked like a bowl of squirming radioactive worms. She stopped looking down. And the higher she climbed the more the tower tottered and turned as stress from the one hundred ton crane lifts shot through the structure. Scarey! Laurie began to question her sanity. Her

last close call came at the top when she almost grabbed a hissing yellow/black coil, the hoisting cable, which would have snuffed her life out instantly. Wow! At last she was on the counterjib, high above the shineing city. She could see Harlem, the Bronx, party boats on the Hudson, a night sky packed with hot stars. As a breeze ruffled her hair, she felt as clean and invincible as a moonbeam. Then rolled mighty music from the metal cage where the Giver worked. She knocked on the door and stepped inside.

"Trolley in!" crackled a voice from the squawk box. "Hold it! Pick it up easy! Nice and easy..." Her lover was looking hundreds of feet down at Broadway through a glass fronted cage and she did too, watching him hoist a load of rubbish wood to the dumpster. Far below his signal man ~~was~~, lit by flood lights, was directing the load with a piece of wood and guiding the crane operator through a walkie-talkie. Vinnie kept his hand on the lever, his eyes flickering between the load and the computer, and all around them was music from a tape cassette, rolling, majestic, cascading from the cage to burst against the glass-walled towers of midtown like quicksilver drops. Laurie thought Vinnie looked like a famous maestro, a conductor of concrete and steel, his crane the biggest baton in the world.

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"Name that tune!"

"Of the Mountain King," said Vinnie. "The climb
you dead."

"...and, it always gives you the sensation of falling," he said, eyes still on the load. "It puts you in touch with danger. You're all alone up high doing something that a lot of guys are afraid to do. They're afraid to do this, they're afraid to do that. It's really exciting."

"You have cranal sex," accused Laurie. "You have orgasms running the machine. You'd rather make love to the rig than me."

with their sleep clothes,

"Hey green-eyed monster," said Vinnie the Giver. "Sit on my lap."

So she did while he made the 125 foot long crane arm boom up and down through the night air like the neck of a blind dinosaur feeding, disgorging, and swiveling back again, the rusty mouth never satisfied, just munching and carrying. Then Vinnie and Laurie, touching, astonished each other *under a blanket* and consummated in a place *with undying desire* utterly unique in the annals of New York lovers.

"Nice and easy!" crackled a voice from the squawk box. "Take it straight down..."

A few days Laurie was sauteeing garlic in olive oil, trying to plumb the mysteries of Italian cuisine. A big disaster! Too much spaghetti, not enough water! But still he was out of Flatbush and firmly in her tiny upper east side apartment, wandering around like a giant in a dollhouse. She was happy. There was quadruple the number of messages on her answering machine, fantastic shopping trips, new eateries to vanquish, and he never asked her to go to Brooklyn. But her man had habits.

"Let's eat Szechuan tonight," said Laurie. "There's a great new place over on Columbus Avenue."

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"I can't stand any more linguini."

"A mix," explained Vinnie. "They both like noodles and I want to meet a guy named Vito Wong. It's like oil and vinegar. Guys with Chinese are white guys from the South."

Laurie was dumbfounded.

"A Brooklyn joke," laughed Vinnie. "Get dressed."

But a real problem emerged with her friends. For some reason they seemed uncomfortable with the crane man. There were less invitations to brunch, dinner parties, places for the blessed to be seen. So what! She had her man. Her trendy

pals had busy careers. She could play social catch up later, putting out of her mind the snide expressions and whispered put downs that happened whenever she appeared with the Brooklynite wearing his Giraldo Crane cap over a Houston Astros tee-shirt with a big red star in the middle, how their eyes turned jealous when he would casually pay for an eight party dinner check with a roll fat enough to choke a Maseratti, their suspicious looks when Vinnie and Laurie declined offers of cocaine. ~~Well~~, at least they had each other and the flying bed. Until the first cryptic phone message.

"Come back to Brooklyn!" demanded a male voice that sounded like it came from the bowels of a concrete mixer. "Party in Brooklyn or I'll kill you! And don't forget who loves you!"

"Who is that guy?" asked Laurie, somewhat alarmed.

"My cousin Rocco," said Vinnie. "A little wild, but nothing to worry about."

More messages followed, promiseing to blow up the Giver's car, crush him in a trash compactor, smash his kneecaps, or gauge out his eyes unless he came to Brooklyn "to party in a whole new way." Each message ended with a declaration of love. Laurie became slightly hysterical.

"Why does he always make threats?" she asked. "He sounds crazy."

Vinnie angrily. "He's from Brooklyn. Those people respect. Not like here. You can't buy it or shine. They'll kill for you. Rocco loves me. It's time we visit Brooklyn."

"Not me," said Laurie firmly.

Vinnie Billi shrugged. "So stay here on fantasy island with the twisted values. I'll go by myself."

"We'll both go," she said quickly.

That was how Laurie Shannon Pollock found herself entering the dread Italian Brooklyn night-land without a visa, a place she thought was one big cave. They

drove across the Williamsburg Bridge, gliding along Eastern Parkway past rows of stately apartment houses, through neighborhoods dreary, dreamy, and fragrant with old doo-wop songs, a world where you could still see stars, climb trees, drink fresh air. The further they drove from Manhattan, the clearer Laurie's mind became. (~~Little did she know at the time that she just a small part of a secret emigration of Manhattan victims~~) By subway and car, unheralded and anonymous, those maimed by the misery of City nights, ~~desperately seeking romance without psychosis~~, were finding the courage to leave celebrity central for clubs in Sheepshead Bay, Bensonhurst, Bay Ridge, East Flatbush, where the girls were just as pretty, the men perhaps more potent, everybody friendlier, and career discussions an endangered species. ~~Sex was alive and well in Brooklyn.~~

"Tonight you're going to ~~the~~ ^{chat} three best clubs," said the Giver. "When the Dodgers were in Brooklyn they were the heart and soul of the world. Then they moved to Los Angeles and lost it. Both towns have crazy people. But in Brooklyn the crazy people have quality."

"Is there anything you don't know?" asked Laurie sourly as they drove through Sheepshead Bay.

bullet? See these bucks? This means I know. See te on the door? That means I know. I'm sitting n leather." right Vin?"

"Listen Laurie," he said as they parked outside a huge nightclub called High Tide. "Tonight the fun and games are over and only the fun remains. Brooklyn is a town to like people, because if you don't you have 3 million problems on your hands. You should learn that. I don't want nobody else's money and I don't want nobody after mine. Tonight we spend."

"You've got a cute way of talking," gushed Laurie who always liked it when

Vinnie the Giver uttered his urban maxims.

It hit her like a wave, like a blast from the past: manhood, style, power. They were lounging outside ~~the Bay Club~~ ^{your} ~~High Tide~~. Mustached men in impeccably tailored dark suits, white shirts, ~~flowered~~ ties, carrying themselves like warriors at ease. She knew instinctively who they were. ~~The traditionalists, the heavy guys, the upholders of the Old Way despite their young bodies.~~ ^{men} who hadn't wasted two minutes of a lifetime pondering the imaginary disadvantages of American women. With expressionless faces they watched the girls pass before them, in high heels, heavily made up, lots of jewelry, preening for the men as they entered the club like kittens on parade. Laurie bristled inside. This was the enemy! And being a well-informed young woman, she knew who was responsible: their mothers! Traitors in aprons! Fat Mama Mias who stuffed their sons with pasta and raised them like spoiled royalty. Don't forget their fathers, gruff bullies who taught the art of headlocks and laughed it off when little Guido dropped a manhole cover on some Jehovah's Witnesses peddling tracts. These guys were the original handsome devils.

"Big Vin~~ny~~," said the bouncer at the door, a former heavyweight contender in a black tuxedo. "When are ^{we} gonna spar again? I'll go easy on you."

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Giver, pressing up close with his fist cocked. ^{is} ~~perhaps~~ ^{the most beautiful club in Brooklyn, two} ~~sheepherd~~ ^{water}, with boats bobbing alongside, and the dance packed, as Vinnie and Laurie moved around to a horseshoe bar where the money flowed as heavily as the liquor. Laurie had never seen so ~~many~~ pretty girls in a night spot. They outnumbered the mustached men by six to one. There were no transvestites on roller skates, chattering punks with blue hair, or costumed misfits to mar the sensuality.

It reminded her of old forties movies

*Upstairs a
travelling red dress*

about night life, or black and white reruns of The Untouchables. The feeling was thick, saucy, spicy, a minestrone of passion and danger. Laurie ate it up. But she knew it was a world where men made the rules.

"Some of these guys look real tough," she said cautiously.

"They are," replied the Giver. "What's wrong with it? In Brooklyn it's still alright to be tough. But the guys aren't expected to be rich and 70% of the girls are out to find a nice guy. Is it too primitive for you?"

"Seventy percent of these girls are out to get laid," corrected Laurie.

"One hundred percent," said Vinnie.

They danced together, watching high-heeled women pluck men from the alcoves to the floor, and Laurie recognized the signs of impending completion, of nights that would end in mating, not lonely cab rides home. Laurie wondered how these poor Italian girls could stand being around macho guys all the time. Then she looked at Vinnie and got confused. They left, wheeling across the balmy Brooklyn ^{night} to Pastel's, another club tucked away on a side street in Bay Ridge. All the clubs were in neighborhoods, not hidden among warehouses. Outside Pastel's was more street glamor: dark men in suits whispering through car

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es, women in finery and razor appetites, stalking others. Vinnie talked with Large Louis the bouncer, ed Pastel's.

landmark in Brooklyn," said Vinnie.

ered Laurie.

More fantastic women, a sunken dance floor, curved bars, la dolce vita in Brooklyn. Older men smoking cigars, with gold chains around their necks, sat in a VIP section watching the action. It was non-stop, pounding, straight from the loins. But the things Laurie liked best, as she began to understand the scene, was the romantic feeling. There was something about the way these

*And like
the untouchables
dancer*

*But guys were
actually into
looking at her
of her*

*at the same time it felt like a
high school dance years later.
Girls were chewing gum, the best and guys were
standing with their blue truck.*

people danced, about the way they smiled and laughed, that she couldn't put her finger on. But it made her feel very comfortable, safe, relaxed. What was it? Then they were off again toward Flatbush, and Vinnie parked across from another club on ^{East} Quentin Road and ~~West~~ 35th Street. They sat for a while watching the throngs outside Club B.

"This place here is ^{my favorite} the hottest spot in Brooklyn," said Vinnie. "You like what you seen so far?"

"It's an acquired taste," said Laurie curtly. "The guys are a bit too 'Guido-ish' for me and the girls look like high class hookers."

The Giver drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "There's always been a competition between Manhattan and Brooklyn girls," he said. "They're both beautiful, both sexy, but one group has class."

"Which group?" she asked, falling for it.

He wouldn't answer and as they pushed through the crowds around Club B, the ~~exploding center of Brooklyn night bliss~~, Laurie was in the middle of a slow burn. What was a girl like her doing in this machismo enclave? These guys were like polar bears wrestling before the mating season, reindeers lock-

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the herd. Laurie didn't have time to think about Club B was like a hurricane. There were so many ^{there was a lot of} see a foot in front of her. Again the men were girls at the apex of Brooklyn fashion. Club B perfume and laughter. A live band was playing

and Laurie let herself be carried by the sound until she heard that familiar gravely voice which had tortured her for months. "Vineeeeeee!! Vin! Vin!" ^{we're in the club} ^{Pounded} The voice belonged to a man in his late twenties with the same face and build as Rocky Marciano. He pushed his way through the crowd, got the Giver in a bear hug, and pounded his back like a dusty carpet. "You came!" I thought

^{kids in the room}
^{spat shut,}
~~sub~~

I'd have to cut your girl friend's legs off to get you out here!"

"This is her," said Vinnie. "Laurie, meet Jerry Rocco, my cousin and the manager of this establishment."

"Christ, I'm sorry," said Rocco, embarrassed. "Forget what I said. I look like a tough guy, don't I?"

"A tough guy? -- or a tough guy to look at?"

A vein popped in Rocco's left temple. His mouth opened, shut, opened. He controlled himself with great effort and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Laurie. "Your eyes are bulging out of your head. Are you on bennies?"

"Whoa! Whoa! What a mouth you got!" cried Rocco. "You got to be from Manhattan. Little Miss East Side Dollar Sign over here!"

"She's a jugular vein cobra," explained Vinnie benignly. "Always with the digs. Forget about it."

"O yeah?" snapped Laurie. "This guy pollutes my answering machine for weeks on end and you want me to kiss his hand?"

"Pollute who? What the hell is she talking about?" asked Rocco, bewildered.

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Dodger, the assistant manager, corralled everyone. Laurie studied the crowd. Men and women, mostly Italian, but with something extra. There were outsiders. And then she heard it --- French.

Women were speaking French! As she pondered this the band began the slow "You're My Coney Island Baby" and all the couples danced close.

"Is this happiness or what?" sighed the Dodger, a thin, friendly looking man in a blue silk suit. "I was dancing the fish to this on Carrol Street fifteen years ago."

"Dodger and me are from the same neighborhood," said Rocco tensely to

Laurie. "We been friends all our lives. And look who's back! Vinnneeee!!"

Laurie made a point of yawning without covering her mouth.

"What's with you?" demanded Rocco. "You need an audience with The Pope before you're happy?"

"Laurie watches a lot of movies," said Vinnie the Giver.

"What kind of movies?" asked Rocco.

"Horror films," replied Laurie. "It was the only way I could get scared.

Until I met you. Were you alright before the sex change operation?"

Rocco's head looked ^{as if} it was about to explode. "So you're Vinnie's girl!

Boy o boy! You want some more champagne? Can I explain to you about Brooklyn?"

"Yes to the first question," said Laurie. "To the second -- only if you don't use any big words. Do you know any big words?"

"Whoa! Whoa!" cried Rocco, wearily putting his head face down on the table as if he was suffering from an enormous migraine headache. "I tried to be nice and failed! This girl makes me tired. Girls like you make me want to stay in Brooklyn until I'm dead."

"Why?" asked Laurie cutely.

"Why?" asked Rocco, snapping to attention. "Because in Brooklyn Brooklyn is like the bad kid in the neighborhood. Attention to him. Where did he go? To Brooklyn. It bad anymore because they're loved in Brooklyn!"

silence.

"You can be yourself in Brooklyn!" roared Rocco, warming to the topic. "You don't have to put on a facade. The meek kid on the block, the quiet kid, he can have a good time too! In Manhattan you're being used for your name, money, or position. It's nearly 100% gold diggers. Not here! In Manhattan the girls dress sexy because they feel sexy. In Brooklyn they dress sexy because they

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want ten guys to pick them up! The girls are great! But the guys from Manhattan don't know about the girls of Brooklyn. Or they're afraid to take the subway or don't have cars. They don't know about Club B! So, Laurie, you think you can have fun now?"

"Are you an axe murderer?" asked Laurie sweetly.

After Rocco had stormed away from the table, she sipped her champagne and drank in the sensuality, watching the dancers sweat. A pair of exotic looking women speaking French passed the booth.

"Why are those girls talking French?" she asked the Dodger.

"Because they're from France."

French! Laurie had been in New York long enough to know that if French girls honored a scene with their presence, it had to be taken seriously. Weren't they light years ahead of everyone else? Her mind was reeling. They were speaking French in Club B! Not ritzy Club A, but Club B way out here in Guidoland. What was happening? Did this mean that Manhattan clubs were no longer hip? That the new Palladium was already passe? That Guidoland was in? She felt a wave of excitement rush through her.

"You look human," said Vinnie. "What's wrong?"

said. "Let's dance!"

ght Vinnie and Laurie tripped the strobe fantastic champagne until they were within arm's length of . But just as they were about to leave Rocco

approached, his face grim.

"Follow me," he said, leading them down a flight of steps to the basement.

"Where's he taking us?" she whispered, but the Giver didn't answer.

Downstairs a bunch of men from the Club B staff were seated around a big table eating manicotti and drinking wine.

"Eat!" ordered Rocco.

"Now?" asked Laurie, incredulous. "What for? It's bedtime."

All the men at the table laughed.

"Bed!" snorted Rocco. "Not in Brooklyn. When the sun sets, we rise."

She sampled some manicotti.

"Delicious! Is it from a catering service?"

"Catering service? My mother made it. She wants me to keep my strength up."

"But why? Where are you going now?"

"Someplace," said Rocco without further explanation.

The sun was coming up as Vinnie paid the toll at the Manhattan entrance of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked.

"If an angel had a face like your cousin, people would stop believing in God."

"Lay off him. The kid has a good heart. *and a head like Brooklyn Larry*
trying to find it under the tomato sauce."

But other excursions to Club B followed. Soon they were regulars on the Brooklyn club circuit, making friends with French girls and other partying emigres from Manhattan. Laurie had a ton of fun. When things got slow she would exchange insults with Rocco. She tried to get her friends from the City to go with . Her Manhattan social life was vanishing.  she got a phone call from Coco, of Coco and Jack, to go to a party and shower for a mutual friend.  "All the girls want to see him."

"What is he? A carnival sideshow?" snapped Laurie. "Should I sell tickets?"

"Calm down, darling," said Coco. "He's just, you know, heavy. It must be very hard on you."

Laurie had long admired her incredibly hip friends. Coco and Jack were

so hip they gave the word superficial a bad name. Except for their cocaine problem, they seemed to have an ideal relationship. He installed neon lighting and she was a marketing analyst. They lived on the 36th floor of an upper East Side high-rise. Laurie thought their condo looked like a magazine layout. It was designed in all grey, a kind of ultra-cool dead soul grey, with borders of pink to remind them that they were alive. Coco and Jack knew every restaurant. The day before it opened, they had eaten there. Coco and Jack were cellophane addicts. Everything in their home was gleaming, shiney, new. Including their dope paraphernalia. It was always "this month's razor blade" and "the best grinder in the world." Laurie liked to visit them, as long she didn't have to stay very long. But how would they like Vinnie? As an afterthought, she wondered how Vinnie would respond to Coco and Jack.

"Degenerate coke heads," said Vinnie as they stood in a grey corner of the living room watching the proceedings. "Why did you drag me here? That stuff is history. I'm in training."

"You're always in training," challenged Laurie. "For a fight that never comes."

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training. And every day in Manhattan is a war!"
Coco was a wispy red-head in a turquoise dress with
"that's some outfit big fellow!" she said, running
tee-shirt which was embossed with a painting of two
"what's this? A little boxing glove! Is it real
gold?"

"It's real," said Vinnie. "Maybe the only thing in the room that's real."
He wandered away for another ginger ale.

"A little rough around the edges, no?" said Coco. They watched the Giver
and Jack trying to talk to each other. Jack, a tiny man in sunglasses and
an Hawaiian shirt over white painter pants, seemed to be trying to make a point

by swinging his coke straw like a baseball ball. Vinnie kept frowning. Laurie learned later that they'd been talking about the Mets. "Darling," said Coco, "you've really got yourself a character. I hear he's been dragging you out to the provinces."

"You mean Brooklyn?"

"I do. Watch yourself Laurie. Those people are dangerous."

"What do you mean?" asked Laurie. "They seem alright."

"Until they own you!" hissed Coco. "Everything is fun and games until the day they come and ask you for a favor. Then they've got you! Your soul is up for grabs! Your life is at stake!"

Before Laurie could respond a portly grey-haired man in a pink sport coat and open necked shirt snuck up behind Coco and gave her a very sexy squeeze. She turned and planted a wet kiss on his lips.

"Great party! Super toot!" he said heartily, then gestured across the room. "Who's the wop? Your bouncer?"

"Laurie, meet my father. The giant is her friend Vincent."

"What do you know?" said the man, extending his hand. "Call me Harry. I'm large guy you got. Big, you know."

and Coco. "I was just warning her about the you-know-

or," said Laurie.

going on in this country," said Harry, stepping closer. "Between the federal government and those guys, the little businessman don't stand a chance. They'll bleed you dry! Believe me, I know. I got friends in the restaurant game."

"Vincent runs a crane," repeated Laurie.

"You can't avoid them in business," said Harry, so close now she could smell his breath. "But you can avoid them in your personal life. Everybody makes choices, you know."

"HE RUNS A FUCKING CRANE YOU ASSHOLE!"

Coco hooked her friend's arm and dragged her to another grey corner.

"I'm sorry about Daddy," she said. "He can't handle his blow. He gets, you know, anxious." Listen Laurie, can we talk girl talk? You know, personal? Alright? Good. How's Vincent in bed?"

"He's fabulous," said Laurie.

Coco's eyes turned glassy. She looked like she was about to cry.

"What's wrong?" asked Laurie. "Are you okay?"

"Can I tell you a secret?" whispered Coco. "Jack and I aren't having sex anymore."

"That's awful!" said Laurie. "Why?"

"Because I'm ten pounds overweight and Jack says he can't get it up until I slim down!"

Laurie stepped back to see if there was anything different about her red-

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ked exactly as she always did. Laurie decided not

ed upon a heart-to-heart with Vinnie after dinner.

enic's, a tiny Italian restaurant on Arthur Avenue

in the South Bronx with wonderful food. Domenic's had no fixed menu: a waiter

came, verbally presented the evening's choices, and settled the tab later.

Vinnie Billi always left enormous tips, never had to wait in line, and was treated like a pasha. "Here comes the man who don't care about money!" the owner would announce loudly when they entered.

"You insulted everybody at Coco's party," said Laurie. "You despise my friends."

Vinnie Billi chewed a piece of veal pizzicata well before answering.

"I should have knocked them out," he said. "They got faces like waxed turds."

"They're my friends!" said Laurie. "They're sophisticated and successful, the kind of people I came to New York to meet."

"I make more money than them," said the Giver. "I risk my life every day to get it."

"Well, I didn't move from Aspen to hang out in the Brooklyn sticks with a bunch of Guidos who only speak the language of intimidation."

"The language of intimidation," mused Vinnie. "That's good. You know what this thing in the salad is? Arrugola. A sort of dandelion. You can only find it several times a year. Don't it taste right with olives, onions, and chickory? You never ate it before you met me. You never even ate borscht, Miss Pollock, out there in Aspen."

"I'm not going to Brooklyn anymore," said Laurie. "I want our relationship to change."

"I'm too old to change," said the Giver. "Don't it mean anything that I love you? Do I ever mistreat you? But you always got to send it in."

The waiter appeared with their after dinner drinks. Vinnie took a sip of

s glass of sanbucco. His expression darkened.

There's only two coffee beans in my glass."

Always! It's a sign." He called the waiter

over and silently pointed to the glass. The waiter snatched it away and screamed at the bartender in Italian.

"I want us to live in the new New York," continued Laurie. "We can change together."

"A big change starts tonight," said Vinnie Billi. "I'm moving out."

The next morning he was gone. She thought he'd be back in a few days but it just didn't happen. Then he was off the Portman Hotel job to run a crane over on the East Side and she didn't see him at all. After a week it hit her hard. She wept more than she ever had in her life. She kept waiting for him to call and raced home after work to check her answering machine. No messages from Vinnie. She wept more and lay on the bed staring at the telephone. One evening it rung.

"Vineee!" rumbled the familiar voice. "You better get out to Brooklyn tomorrow night. It's Bikini Night at Club B and you're gonna judge the girls. If I don't see you by 10:30 you're in deep shit."

She grabbed the phone.

"Rocco? It's Laurie. Vinnie is gone."

"Gone? What do you mean -- gone? Is he dead?"

"I mean we're not together anymore."

There was a long pause.

"Don't worry, Laurie! I'll find him! He can travel to the ends of the earth but he can't escape me! He can run but he can't hide! I'll make him eating..."

and wept again.

woman but soon looked anorexic. Little food, no teamster friends at the Portman job sent pastrami Laurie could only nibble. Manhattan had become a

crowded desert. Then one afternoon, after a lunch time walk, she stopped at the teamster's trailer. She was told that a 35-ton crane unloading steel rods from a truck to a construction pit had toppled over on 63rd and 3rd. Somebody was trapped underneath. Laurie became alarmed and scared. Was that Vinnie's

job? She scanned the block in her mind but couldn't picture a building site on 63rd and 3rd. She went to her boss and asked him if he'd heard about the accident. "Yeah, on 62nd Street. What street is Vinnie on?" Laurie said, "On 62nd!" Without getting hysterical she walked with her boss to the master mechanic's shanty to see if he knew details. Her boss got stopped by someone with a job related question. During those few seconds, with tears in her eyes, Laurie kept imagining Vinnie lifeless beneath the crane and all the things that weren't finished between them. When they got to the master mechanic's office, he told them it wasn't the Giver's job.

"Vinnie Billi will never go down," he said. "Vinnie Billi knows rigs."

Laurie's tears dried up and she headed back to the shelter of her office to let out a private sigh of relief.

At that moment Vinnie and his crane partner, Ralph Matucci, were driving up 2nd Avenue in an open Fiat convertible. They were returning from lunch. Vinnie noticed how the traffic was getting really heavy, especially on 62nd Street. So he turned right. They saw a load of police cars on Third Avenue.

"The rig flipped over," said a cop. It was a block from their job. They rushed crowd. A cop asked where they were going. They

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had to operate the big crane that was being brought
When Vinnie got to the accident he saw a 49 year old
lained under the massive wheel fenders of the
ed. The crane itself was precariously balanced
between the sidewalk and the construction pit. At any moment it could come crashing down.

Vinnie Billi flung himself into one of the most publicized and impressive rescue efforts in American history. With traffic backed up for miles, as Brigitte Gurney talked with God, EMS medics, police, firemen, and construction

workers worked for hours to free the pinned woman and keep her alive. Three cranes brought to the site made unsuccessful attempts to lift the 70,000 pound machine. Vinnie and Matucci couldn't budge it. Then the cops requested a giant red-and-green Gerosa crane from the Bronx firm. It was driven to Manhattan with a police escort. It was pontooned over a fifty foot utility vault beneath the street and hooked to the fallen crane. Then Emergency Service cops used a jackhammer to excavate concrete under the trapped woman and saw through the sheet metal that pinned her. Six hours after the accident cops and firemen freed Brigitte Gurney. After wrapping her legs in protective "trousers" they removed her from the pit and rushed her to a hospital.

But Vinnie's work wasn't over. The toppled crane still had to be removed. First they torched through the fallen beam. Then both men gingerly climbed through the underbelly of the crane and hooked up cables, moving it inch by inch. "Watch the sidewalk you're standing on fellows," said an inspector. "It may go down." Then it was dark. The crowds and television reporters were gone now. But they worked through the night.

After trying to call his crane all day, Laurie came to the accident. After

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ing, the Giver emerged from the site. He looked
called his name. He looked up but didn't see her
. That was okay, because she saw he was alright.
him to call.

s that night but none from Vinnie. When Laurie
fitfully turned on the television she saw Vinnie Billi on every news report
working with the emergency cops to ease Brigitte Gurney to freedom. When she
slipped out to buy tomorrow's papers, there was Vinnie Billi on the front page
of two daily papers, again with the cops and the stretcher. Laurie was miserable.
She was upset and confused. What she didn't know was that when the crane was

finally removed at 8:A.M. the next morning Vinnie had driven his partner home. Both men had worked for twenty-six hours straight. Matucci's wife made them steak and eggs for breakfast. Then Vinnie fell on the couch and slept all day.

So it was evening when the crane man knocked on Laurie Shannon Pollock's door.

"Where were you?" she cried. "Why didn't you call?"

"Why didn't I call?" said Vinnie. "I was out bowling. You know how it is when I bowl. I just can't quit."

Laurie started screaming. Laurie started crying. Then they made love. And soon it was morning of the next day.

While all of this activity was going on there were numerous phone calls from Brooklyn. They were ignored. Laurie switched off her answering machine. Vinnie was back on the job within a day. Over the weekend they had fun eating hot dogs and ice cream at a party thrown by Mayor Koch for the rescuers. After some rest the Giver was back in the gym sparring with fighters half his age and training hard. One day after a workout he entered the apartment as the phone rung incessantly.

"Vinnie? This is Rocco. I saw your picture in the paper and I burned it!

I kicked in the screen! Then I put your picture on it! You disgust me! You got no loyalty! Every- you goofy punk! I've been waiting to bust your

Vinnie impatiently.

"Enough? Not for you! I'll rip your throat out!"

"When?" asked Vinnie. "Name a time and place."

"Tonight! Right here at Club B! Just you and me! A fair one! Got the balls for it? You're old! You hear me? You're old!!!"

"I'll be there," said Vinnie Billi.

He quickly showered, had a bite to eat, and was about to leave when Laurie

came home. She asked where he was going.

"Brooklyn. To straighten out some shit with Rocco. The kid has gone too far."

"You're going to fight him?" she asked incredulously. "No! Don't go! It's an ambush! He'll have twelve guys waiting for you!"

"Not Rocco. He'd never stoop that low. The kid's all pride. He'll fight me by himself."

"Don't go!" shrieked Laurie.

"I'm going," said Vinnie at the door.

"Then I'm going with you!"

He couldn't stop her and soon they were once again in Brooklyn, wheeling through those squalid and splendid streets. She tried to persuade him to turn back, but Vinnie would have none of it. He kept brooding the whole way.

"All my life I loved that kid like a brother," he said bitterly. "I took care of him, got him jobs, lent him money. And now he turns on me."

"Just freeze him out of your life," said Laurie. "Don't return his calls."

"That's Manhattan, not Brooklyn. Out here people will go to any lengths not crossed the line."

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front of Club B, Vinnie made Laurie wait in the car at the locked nitespot. There was no answer. He knocked on the door until it cracked. The Giver pushed it open and peered into the darkness. He sensed the presence of people inside. He waited for the first move.

"I knew you'd come!" laughed a gravelly voice in the dark.

"Show yourself, Rocco! I'm ready."

"Ready for me, sure!" yelled Rocco. "But not for this!"

Every light in Club B went on at once. Vinnie jumped back. Blinked his eyes. The room was festooned with red, white, and blue streamers and blowups

of Winnie at the rescue. There were long tables filled with food and drink. In the center was an elaborate orange and black cake shaped like a crane. A little plastic man was sitting in the cab. The club was filled with his friends from the old neighborhood. As people pressed around Winnie, laughing and praising his heroics, Rocco emerged from the darkness. He was wearing a black tuxedo and a white ruffled shirt and smoking a cigar.

"Some surprise, huh? I knew it took extreme measures to get you out here," he said. "See that cake? Like it? Know how much this spread cost?"

"Fuck you and die," said Winnie warmly with his arm around his cousin.

"That was a very immature thing to do," said Laurie angrily. "You almost scared me to death."

Rocco roared with laughter.

"Immature? Whoa! Whoa! We got the Manhattan therapist with us again. Laurie, this is Brooklyn. Either we're out surfing or we got a party going on."

Then he stared at the crane-shaped cake with the plastic figure.

"This is Brooklyn too," he said, and with a swift movement plucked the
bit off his head.

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