

## Need Not Apply

By Robert Palmer

“Here,” said The Fat Man, handing Sean a no-frills .22 automatic with a bulky, homemade suppressor screwed onto the muzzle. The Fat Man was a doughy, dope-eyed son of a bitch with bad breath and worse manners. His name was Larry but Sean couldn’t think of him as anything but “The Fat Man.” His buddy Jake - a twitchy little fellow with bad acne - wore a constant Cheshire-cat grin that ate at Sean’s nerves; he could do with a good slap.

Sean racked the throwaway’s slide back. It was loose and rattled on the return. He didn’t much like either man, and he sure-as-shit didn’t like working without his own tools.

“I’m not using this pawn-shop pea shooter.” He offered it back to The Fat Man, muzzle first - just for giggles.

The Fat Man’s dull eyes got hard. “You’re already in too far to back out ya dumb Mick. If you’re doin’ this at all, you’re doin’ it our way. If you ain’t...” he let the threat evaporate into the stale air trapped inside the old Caprice Classic. It smelled of sweat and The Fat Man’s passed gas.

Sean could have capped them both and walked away. The car was half-hidden behind a trash compactor behind the Church Street Piggly Wiggly and a light rain was keeping everybody inside. There probably wouldn’t be anybody out back until some box boy came out to spark up on company time. It would’ve been easy – messy, but easy. Still, it wouldn’t get him any closer to his goal.

“Yeah, all right.” Sean dropped the magazine out of his own .22, a stainless Ruger with a hair trigger and tritium sights, ejected the live round from the spout, and handed his piece to The Fat Man. It rolled his stomach watching those sausage-fingers touch his steel.

“Good,” said The Fat Man. “Let’s move,” he said to Jake. The car rolled round the front and stopped in a parking spot next to a cart corral. “Christ I could go for a Rocket Dog,” said The Fat Man. “Fuckin’ Rocket Dog and chili cheese fries.”

Sean eased back in the seat, tuned out his compatriots, and watched the world flow by, passively observing; recording. As the ashen sky threatened to open up in earnest, he spotted a black and white roll past in the rear view, the image blurred by rainwater. An elderly black man dressed in solemn churchgoing clothes sat on a bench at the front of the store, waxing nostalgic - or maybe narcoleptic - propped against the head of his cane. A screaming soccer mom verbally wrangled two of her kids while strapping a third grubby midget into the back seat of her minivan. Life, in general, passed lazily by as it does on warm and sticky days in the city. It was after the lunch rush, though you’d never believe it listening to The Fat Man whine, but still too early for most people to be getting out of work. Traffic was at a low and the parking lot nearly empty. It was far from an ideal time of day or location for a hit, but workable. It had to be. This was an audition.

After ten minutes of listening to Jake try unsuccessfully to suck something from his teeth, Sean was ready to strangle them both. Before he could, The Fat Man sat up straight as if someone had lit one of his hemorrhoids. It was a knee-jerk reaction, Sean

thought, broadcasting the fact that the three hard-looking jokers in the non-descript car weren't just waiting out the rain. Uncertainty buzzed at the back of his brain and, not for the first time, Sean questioned the legitimacy of the gruesome twosome. It was hard to believe they might be his ticket to some solid work and a reputation.

“Dere he is. In da blue pants and pink shirt. Fuckin’ faggot.”

Sean had already picked him up but The Fat Man pointed with his stubby index finger anyway. Salt and pepper hair going thin on top combed over and laden with “product,” bushy mustache and round, silver-framed glasses, the target looked like middle management, even had the paunch of a well-fed, aging yuppie.

Sean was out of the car before The Fat Man could vomit another impotent threat. His short jacket and hat disguised him well in the rain. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket, plugged it into his ear, and instantaneously became one with the human herd.

Inside, the air was frosty and over-conditioned, raising gooseflesh on Sean’s arms. It smelled of spilt beer and rotting melons. Calculated to lull and blunt the thriftiness of shoppers, the Muzak drifting down from hidden speakers was far too refined for Sean’s taste. He shook the rain from his hat, dropping his cell to the floor, the motions timed perfectly to keep security cameras from recording his face. He grabbed a sale flyer from a rack for camouflage and tucked it under his arm.

The objective, for that’s what the target was - just another waypoint along a carefully plotted course that would culminate in Sean’s “employment” - maneuvered a rusting cart through the produce department without even sampling the grapes. Sean followed, and together, predator and prey, rounded the corner at the butcher shop. The man grabbed a few cheap steaks and a big package of burger. Sean paused and let him enter the aisles proper, aisles that ran the length of the store. At the opposite end of the first one, Sean could see two teenage girls leaning on their respective conveyor belts, gossiping and giggling with a curly-headed bag boy. Behind them, the floor-to-ceiling windows were streaked with rain and fogged into opacity by condensation.

Sean bypassed that aisle, grabbing a roll of paper towels from an end-cap display, careful to poke his finger through the plastic at the top so as not to leave fingerprints on the cellophane. He closed his eyes, trying to empathize with his objective and plot a likely intercept. No veggies, big on the beef, he might have been a man who enjoyed a beer, or maybe something a little stiffer, but glass made a racket when it shattered and there was a good chance that these jacketed rounds The Fat Man had saddled Sean with would plow right through bone and brain and blow out the other side.

A young woman shoved past Sean pushing a plastic truck-shaped shopping cart in which her two young children were arguing. They both wanted to be the driver but there was only one wheel. She pushed past him as if he didn’t exist and dumped a colorful box of cereal into the waiting paws of her offspring. They tore it open and began to devouring it with sloppy smacking sounds.

The solution came to him unbidden: dairy. Everybody buys dairy.

Sean wandered to the end of the store, carefully avoiding high theft areas like the beauty care and the liquor aisles, at which there were undoubtedly pointed cameras, stopping every now and then as if to shop, tracking the objective in his peripheral vision. Opposite the main entrance, in the far corner of the store, was an open-fronted dairy case.

Holding the sale flyer up as if to compare prices, Sean made a recon of the kill

zone. The location was good: the geography of the shelving blocked Sean from most of the potential witnesses. There was an emergency door ahead of him, close, spatially, to the dumpster where Jake and The Fat Man would be waiting to pick him up. It was alarmed and had a camera trained on it. Sean hated complications but it was always better to have multiple options.

He almost abandoned his position when an employee wheeled a bucket of bleach-water by and began mopping. Thankfully, an intercom barked and the man waddled away leaving his bucket where it sat. Sean breathed a short sigh of relief but didn't relax; the pink-shirted man had rounded the corner.

The objective came humming happily to himself, totally oblivious that his life was about to end violently. His cart was loaded with junky bachelor food and the diseased thing that functioned as Sean's conscience deduced happily that he had no wife or kids. Sean stepped aside, allowing the objective to reach for a bag of fiesta-blend shredded cheddar, and closed his eyes. In slow motion, like a movie on the big screen, he saw the objective bend for the cheese, saw the suppressor fitting snugly into the roll of paper towels as he brought the pistol up, saw the crimson mist as his finger double-tapped the trigger.

He opened his eyes and life imitated art...almost.

As his finger pulled the trigger, he was expecting the slight metallic zing of a "silenced" shot but the angry barking pop of the little pistol startled him. Still, the bullets flew true - straight through the back of the objective's skull, and kept on through pints of cottage cheese before flattening on the sheet metal of the refrigerated case with a bang.

The pregnant pause that followed ended in a scream.

Sean didn't wait to see from whom the scream had come. He dashed for the emergency exit, dropping the pistol in the abandoned bucket of bleach on the way. His undoing had been the ill-constructed suppressor. He'd seen tiny flames arc from the seal around the gun's muzzle. The defect had completely nullified the intended effect of the equipment, had probably amplified the report. Even before he crashed through the door and caught sight of Jake laughing as the Caprice disappeared in a blue cloud of rubber-smoke, Sean knew he had been set up.

He closed the door behind him and set off at a moderate jog, stripping off his coat and hat and chucking them over an embankment into a dirty stream. In a tee shirt and sweatpants, he transformed from a fleeing felon into just another health nut jogging in the rain. The Caprice disappeared into traffic but Sean paced himself. Traffic was thickening, and he had a good idea where they were heading. Buck's Harbor was a decent-sized town but it was too far south for The Fat Man's favored fast food chain to have a strong foothold yet; there was only one Rocket Dog.

As he jogged down the sidewalk, dodging clusters of school kids playing hooky and jumping over the splayed legs of winos passed out in doorways, Sean mentally kicked himself in the ass. He couldn't believe they'd duped him with their shady credentials. He should have been more wary but the offer they had made him - just one small "audition" before they passed him up the food chain with glowing recommendations - had been too good to pass up after months of getting the cold shoulder from the Mafioso types he'd been chatting up. He knew he had the skills, he'd just needed someone to recognize them. They had, or so he thought. But they'd just been jerking him around to get a laugh. Sean was not someone wise men jerked around.

The Rocket Dog was four blocks ahead, situated at the main gate of a small, pointless park whose only redeeming quality was a memorial statue dedicated to veterans of some nameless war. Sean cut through a couple back yards and gained some time but he reached the park just as the faded blue Caprice pulled away from the drive-thru. He could see The Fat Man shoving a massive pile of condiments atop a tiny bun into his mouth through the rain-slicked windshield as Jake eased the car into traffic.

Sean cursed as a fire lit in his side. He'd not run since high school. The traffic was heavier here, slowing the car, but he didn't know how much longer he could keep up. He followed behind, puffing heavily, the pain flaring in his side with every pounding footfall. When the blinker flicked on at the entrance to a rundown old hotel, long since closed and placed on a list of derelicts to be demolished, Sean would have laughed had he been able to breathe. They'd returned to the same place from which they'd picked him up.

The building itself was only five stories high, but most of it's bulk, due to an ebb in the traffic flow on Harbor Street, loomed between the covered portico and the main drag on Cross Street. Sean leaned hard on the crumbling corner stones trying to catch his breath. The Caprice was idling, the engine noise echoing in the enclosed space. He could see The Fat Man stuffing his face and Jake laughing and slapping his partner on the back. Their voices carried through the open windows but the words were lost to the wind and rain.

Sean slowed his breathing, willed his heart into submission, and unsnapped the clasp on the small ankle holster strapped to his leg. He crouched low and eased closer, using the car to hide himself from view.

"Fucking priceless," he heard Jake say. "Abso-fucking-lutely."

The Fat Man sucked mustard from his fingers and held up the glittering steel of Sean's Ruger. His tongue came out of the corner of his mouth like a fat slug and licked up a bit of something on his lips. "Who the fuck wants to be a hitman anyway?" The Fat Man said. "I mean really. You gotta be fucked in the head."

Jake nodded and started to spout some wiseass remark, but the words caught in his throat as he spotted a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. Just before the driver's side window shattered and three soft lead rounds - each scored lovingly by hand with a criss-cross pattern - entered his head, his expression went slack. He collapsed into The Fat Man's lap, dripping brains and blood and chunks of safety glass into his chili fries.

If nothing else, Sean thought, this whole cat-and-mouse gag was worth it just to see that skinny prick's grin melt like wax.

"Now who's the dumb one, you shit?" Sean said, and squeezed the trigger twice more, emptying his .32 revolver.

He leaned through the shattered window, mindful of the hot scent of blood and loosed bowels, and retrieved his Ruger from the dash. In that instant, staring at The Fat Man leaking into his own last meal, Sean decided he wasn't cut out to be an employee. Freelance was better. He could choose the idiots for which he worked.

He tucked his precious pistol into the waistband of his jogging pants and disappeared into the growing shadows of the coming twilight without looking back.

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*work at a supermarket while dreaming up all sorts of demented ideas he can put on paper. His wonderful wife, Beverly, suffers dutifully as his chief reader and through all of the re-writes. This is his second successful attempt at crime fiction (the first being lost between the covers of a magazine long since dead and gone) but some of his dark fantasy can still be found on [midnighttimes.com](http://midnighttimes.com).*