

## Men of Honor

By Barry Baldwin

Solly (actually Salvatore, but he had Hebraized this long ago, to confuse the opposition and to gratify a private joke) was a hit man of the old school. And not just any hit man: the hit man. No one questioned his right to the title of first among equals or *primus inter pares* as it was called by the more polished of his employers, proud to show off a scrap of Latin remembered from the village priest in the old country. But it went far beyond that. Like one of the tomb painters of ancient Egypt whose work was done in the certain knowledge that it would be seen by no living eye, Solly's skills were disclosed only to those whom they would send a split-second later to their final destiny of the grave. And not always then. For, although he disdained as needlessly flashy the new-fangled letter bombs, and remote-controlled devices, and umbrellas tipped with strange poisons, he was as adept in the arranging of plausible car accidents or falls under subway trains as he was with a silenced gun at point blank range in some featureless hotel room or the type of mean street Philip Marlowe was forever walking down.

Solly was on no police file; he was not even a twinkle in the collective eye of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Only his few employers and many targets ever had cause to know him. He was not ashamed of his craft. Shame, indeed, never stood a chance of entering into it. Solly only accepted contracts put out by gangsters on other gangsters for whose liquidation the world would be a slightly better place. Nor was he proud of what he did, only of how well he did it. As he would have said, had he ever discussed the matter with anyone, it was not the execution but the execution of the execution that counted; an addiction to bad puns was one of Solly's two weaknesses. But he never talked about his work when sober, and he never got drunk, nor had he ever been known to sleep with a person of any sex. He must have done once, though, since his other, and greater, weakness was his daughter Miranda, currently trying to decide between the several Ivy League schools whose recruiters had taken one look at her transcript and two at her legs and offered her a place on the spot.

Unfortunately for Solly, as that tunelessly nasal guitar twanger Robert Zimmerman (whose own name change had gone the other way) had famously put it, *The Times Are A'Changin'*. Indeed, for Solly they already had. One by one, his original employers, a small and select group in the first place, were departing - some to cells in which to pass the rest of their lives, others to graves for transition to that next world in which they firmly believed, a few to retirement back in Sicily (in order, as the old Mafia office joke had it, that they might be murdered on native soil). True, in their heyday, you might receive a Brooklyn Stomping or be rebuked by the cigarette punch whereby they would offer you a smoke to relax you, then break your jaw as you lit up. But you needed their permission to use a gun, and drugs were strictly taboo. And they kept the streets safe. If your apartment was in a block they owned, your wife or girlfriend could walk alone there at midnight without fear of being mugged or raped. But their successors were younger, cruder, with not even a pretense at piety or the family life. Punks reared on the new technology and the new morality, unleashing upon the streets their children from hell, crack-fuelled teenagers in baseball caps wielding automatic weapons as if they were designer accessories. Solly had nothing but contempt for them, and his feelings

diminished even if they did not quite extinguish the regret he felt at slipping into the life of a retired suburbanite.

Also unfortunately for Solly, he knew in more senses than one where the bodies were buried. If he was contemptuous of them, they were mistrustful of him. He was the past, they were the future. But before you can become part of the past or the future, you have to share the present with each other. Judging Solly by their own unimaginatively mean standards, they feared he would one day let something slip or write his memoirs or appear on one of the trashier talk shows for a price that would easily encompass the plastic surgery and disappearance to the ends of the earth that any such disclosures would necessitate.

Something had to be done about Solly. But how? In the close-knit circle of his fellow-professionals, he was tantamount to God. Nobody would ever accept a contract put out on him. And a combination of veneration and trade union solidarity meant they would resent anyone else doing their job for them, and with them, resentment was a euphemism for vengeance. So agitated did the masters of the punk universe become that one of two of them actually broached the idea of selling him to the authorities. But even punks draw the line at that. Besides, they had no idea if Solly's code of honor would withstand the temptation of trading information for the witness protection program which would certainly be offered to him.

Then, out of the blue, the last of the old guard who had known and employed Solly for years, a man who had sold his lucrative territories and rackets (the new brigade had learned from their accountants and lawyers to refer to these as "business investments") to them but who was retained in their councils both as a token of the respectable criminal past and as a kind of good luck charm (for the new masters of this universe are no less superstitious than the old - the difference being that they would consult the likes of Faith Popcorn rather than cross themselves) said, "I've got an idea..."

"Why me? You know I'm out of it now. And I wouldn't work for those bums if they offered me a million a hit like that guy with the golden gun in James Bond."

"Relax. You'd be working for me, not them. We go back a long way, Solly. And this is something special. Someone special, I should say. Very special. You're the only one I could trust to do it. It's a hit like no other. It'll be the crown of your career, the hit man's hall of fame..."

"Whatever." Solly cut contemptuously into the parade of clichés. "The answer's no. I'm too old and I don't need it."

"You're not too old and you do need it." The man's eyes efficiently swept around Solly's den. Compared to the punks - whose ideas of taste often made him think how much it must cost them to look so trashy - it was a model of taste, but not so tasteful that you couldn't count the dollars that had made it so. "You've made plenty and you've spent plenty. And you're in a profession that doesn't carry a pension and a dental plan. And you've got that sassy daughter of yours with her heart set on four years, maybe more if she goes on to graduate school, at a fancy university..."

The man knew when to talk and when to stop talking, another reason why he was still tolerated by the punks. Solly sipped away at his cup of Earl Grey tea, like a sated bishop in a brothel. He had to admit that the man was making sense. "I don't know."

The man knew he was nearly there. No one had ever heard Solly say “I don’t know” before. “Look, I’ll pay you twice the usual, plus a bonus big enough to cover your girl’s tuition for her first year.”

Solly was ashamed of his waverings. The man was right. “Okay, I’ll do it. But you’ve got to understand, this is pos-i-tive-ly the last one. After this, it’s goodbye Brooklyn, hello St. Petersburg for me. What kind of a job do you want? Public or private?”

This was insider talk. Public meant a bullet, private an arranged accident.

“Private. Very private. This guy’s way too important for anything public. Anyway, he’s too well liked for it. Cause all sorts of repercussions I don’t need.”

“Who is he? Or she?” These days, he reflected, with all the feminist crap flying around, his last hit might be his first woman.

“It’s a he, for sure,” said the man. “I don’t know any dames worth killing. And I don’t figure you for one who’d do that.”

Solly ignored this. “Who is this he, then?”

The man shook his head in mock reproach. “Solly, Solly, maybe you are too old at that. You know you never get that information until you’ve taken the job and get to where you’re going.”

“Well, at least the tradition lets me ask you where’s that? If it’s out on the Coast, you can forget it right now. I hate long plane rides, especially now with all this security hassle. And I sure as hell don’t plan on being in LA or Frisco when the Big One hits.”

“Relax. It’s not the Coast. It’s close, very close. You’ll laugh when I tell you.”

“So, tell me.”

“Detroit.”

“Detroit? Detroit?” Solly said this in such a way that the man wondered if he was going to burst out into a version of New York, New York. He was relieved when Solly burst out into the predicted laugh. “Well, what do you know? All those crap movies about hit men from Detroit and I end up going to good old Murder City USA to do my last job. Okay, you’ve got yourself a deal. Now, let’s see the usual.”

The usual was half the payment, cash in hand, the rest to follow by gentleman’s agreement when the job was done. To Solly’s surprise, the man counted out the entire fee. “The bonus will follow when it’s over. That way, you’ll keep your daughter in your mind, then you won’t be tempted to back out at the last minute.”

The man only said this to sharpen Solly’s resolve. He knew he’d never backed out on a contract and wasn’t about to louse up his good name by doing so on his swan song.

Solly followed the man’s instructions. These caused him no grief. He’d heard it all before. He flew to Detroit on a ticket paid for in cash in a name that was not his own, checked into a hotel on Woodward - one of the big ones, on the principle that you were more anonymous in a Hilton or Sheraton than in some fleapit - and settled down to wait for his information from the local messenger, some anonymously vital and vitally anonymous cog in the wheel.

He sat on the bed, his mind half on the job, half on Wheel of Fortune on the large TV in the room. Pat and Vanna. What if they were one day to offer a trip to Detroit to make a hit in the special place on the wheel? Would Vanna point at it with her usual

implausible enthusiasm? Solly allowed himself a smile at the idea, a change from his usual wondering how they got her into those dresses.

The ruins of his steak and fries frowned at him from the trolley which the waiter had wheeled in half an hour ago. Solly had been hungry: nothing like the combination of your last mission and an in-flight bag of peanuts to sharpen the taste buds. It was strictly against the rules to use room service when you were on a job - one more person who might remember you. But what the hell? If you can't break the rules on your last job, when can you?

Wheel of Fortune clattered to its nightly conclusion, the audience clapping the prize more than the contestant. Solly knew what time it was without looking at his watch or the flashing digital clock radio at his bedside. Right on cue, an envelope was slid under his door. He waited long enough for the messenger to be gone - it was important to them both as well as professional courtesy that they didn't see each other, in case anything went wrong, however unlikely that was - then opened the door a fraction to check there was no one else in the corridor, no other guest or any maid roaming around turning down beds for the night. Without haste, Solly picked up the envelope, remembering as always to bend his knees for the sake of his back - he'd once had a slipped disk, a condition whose sufferers never forget. Still without haste, he walked back to the bed and sat down, killing the sound of the opening strains of Jeopardy with the remote control.

He opened the envelope and took out a single sheet of featureless paper. Its neat capital letters - no messing around with bits cut from newspaper, that was dime novelette stuff - it read: SOLLY.

It could not be denied that Solly sat as though glued to the bed for several minutes, almost slack-jawed, until he remembered who he was and snapped his mouth shut. Then he laughed soundlessly, shaking his head in admiration. What a stroke of genius! He'd been half-expecting to get hit for a while. His own sense of how the punks felt about him and what he knew and what he might do with that knowledge, plus little things he'd overheard or had obliquely reported to him. The notion of going into hiding had never crossed his mind. Real professionals didn't do that. When the going gets tough, the one thing the tough don't do is get going anyplace.

The longer Solly sat on his bed, the more he liked it. He'd had a good run. Despite the man's flatteries, he was getting old, no two ways about that. In no time at all, his incipient arthritis wouldn't let him squeeze a trigger or give a guy that discreet push which requires a lot of strength and razor reflexes. And he most certainly wasn't going to spend the rest of whatever life God had set aside for him looking over his shoulder or checking under his car every time he went out in St. Petersburg or anywhere else.

Above all, it would solve the problem of Miranda's fees. The man had been right, he wasn't flush these days, and it had been worrying him how to swing them. The idea that the man might renege on the agreement was something else that never entered his head. The man, like himself, belonged to the old school: what he had said, he had meant.

Solly stood up, went into the bathroom where he flushed the paper and envelope down the john, then walked back across the room to the window which he eased open and went through to the balcony and looked down. Across the alley, there was a battered yellow cab. Under the streetlight, some guy was tinkering with its engine, half-hidden by the hood. Solly nodded to himself at the sight. There had been stories in the papers

recently about impostor yellow cabs roaming the streets in search of innocent public prey, looking and smelling like the real thing.

Back in the room, Solly had a couple of drinks at the wet bar, occasionally flicking through the TV channels, looking for a program he knew would be short. No point in getting hooked on a long movie he wouldn't be seeing the end of. Forty-five minutes and three drinks later, he went back through the window and checked that the guy was still tinkering. Solly came back into the room one last time, drank most of what was left in the bottle of Jack Daniels, got himself on to the balcony with a lurch he only half had to manufacture, leaned over the parapet until he reached the point of no return, and went down the twenty-five stories without a sound.

There was no one to see him arrive on the sidewalk except the guy with the car; Solly had checked before he came down. In any case, it wasn't the sort of alley you would want to walk in, day or night, in Detroit. The guy drove away quickly but quietly in the car which had apparently come back to life under his mechanical ministrations.

When he was well away from the scene, he made a call from a phone booth. The man waited until the guy's story had been confirmed in the papers and on TV the next day. It was a convenient bonus that they didn't concentrate on the body on the sidewalk so much as on a complaint from some woman living up in the penthouse suite about how long it had taken the police to clear it away. "It is outrageous," she was reported as saying, "People who pay this kind of money to live in this kind of place shouldn't have to look at such things."

The first thing the man had to arrange was no big deal: shut the mouth of the guy with the yellow cab. The second was more tricky, how Miranda would get her fees without knowing the whys and wherefores. But he'd work something out.

He, too, was a man of honor, and he hoped that when his turn came, as come it must, he would be given the chance to go out as professionally as Solly and in such a way that his passing would be equally of benefit to someone, although he had no daughter.

*Barry Baldwin has published around 50 short stories, in (e.g.): Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine (twice); Argosy; Carve Magazine (twice); Clarity of Night; Conundrum; Crime & Suspense; Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine (three times); Flash Fantastic (twice); Great Mystery & Suspense; Handheld Crime (twice); Hardluck Stories (twice - both contest winners); Hellas; Jewish Affairs; Monarch Mysteries; Mouthful of Bullets (twice); Murderous Intent; Muzzle Flash (13 'postcard' mysteries); Mysterical-E (twice); Powder Burn Flash (three times); Shattercolors Literary Review (twice); Shots; Silver Moon (twice); Sleuths in Cahoots; Sliptongue (twice); Storyteller; The Third Degree; ThugLit; Without A Clue.*

*I have also published a 10,000 word story as a chapbook (Rembrandt & Company, St Petersburg, Florida, 2005).*

*Plus, stories in the following print anthologies: Adventure (Monkeybrain Press, Austin, Texas, 2005 - a 16,000 worder); Doses of Death (Red Lotus Press, Mexico, New York); Modern Magicians, Wizards & Witches (Kerlak Publishing, Memphis, 2005); Short Attention Span Mysteries -2 yarns herein (Kerlak Publishing, Memphis, 2005).*

*IN 1999 and 2000, I was a Finalist in the short story category for, respectively, the Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis Awards and the Bouchercon USA) Anthony Awards, for stories published in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine and Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. In 2004, I was a Preliminary Finalist in the Fish Publishing International short story contest (Ireland), and am again in 2007. In 2005, I was a Preliminary Finalist in the 2005 Raymond Carver short story contest - my entry is published in the*

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*Biographical Note: Born (1937) and educated in England; college-university lecturer in England/Australia/Canada. Now Emeritus Professor of Classics, University of Calgary, and Fellow of The Royal Society of Canada. Published 12 books and c. 600 articles on Greece, Rome, Byzantium, 18th-Century History & Literature, and Albanian History/Language/Literature. As freelance writer, have contributed many magazine and newspaper articles on many subjects in various countries. Did a 2-year stint as regular columnist for the British daily newspaper Morning Star. Currently write regular columns for (e.g.) Catholic Insight (Canada); Fortean Times (UK/USA); Presbyterian Record (Canada); Stitches (Canada); Verbatim (USA/UK).*