

Tough Love on Moyamensing Street

By Patrick Cobbs

The long metal spring tick-tunged against the wooden door of the Tally Ho Shoppe. Inside, the tobacco-spiced air sucked me down the rabbit hole to a place I never wanted to be again. South Philly, the high school years.

You'd think I would be in a better mood, just one day away from hitching it with the honey-skinned miracle who popped the eyes of every guy, white or black, all the way down Moyamensing Street. The corroded brass chimes should be wedding bells in my head.

Not so.

The world should be covered in frosting. I had done it after all – getting her. And *we* had done it – beaten the doubt away from all sides. Even that old place should look beautiful now. Instead, a feeling of panic pressed in on me like a thumbtack in the skull and I would have sworn those little bells on the door were calling out to the lepers of my past. I had to hate them all.

The guy behind the counter, Jimmy, hadn't changed in fifteen years. He still had the scraggly hair, the yellowed teeth and wide, makes-you-kind-a-wonder smile.

"I help you?" he asked, even though he had to see the badge in my shirt pocket. And he couldn't have missed it that the only patrons for the last three hours were either of the Philly's Finest variety, or those we in the biz call suspects.

I bought a Ring Ding from him and paid with my dampest single.

The Tally Ho was the kind of place you could get a Mad Magazine, a vanilla popsicle or a beer. It lived on magically unchanged by progress in a neighborhood where Irish, Italian, Jew and Black were together from the beginning and still managed to keep the hatred fresh. It was a vestige of smut from my ill-fated adolescence, but today I had to make it an opportunity. I didn't see a choice in that.

In the narrow backroom, amid a smoky haze, were our four suspects – my chums from a long bygone day. They stood there, pressed against the dirty walls, no different than during our summers of street-side entrepreneurship. Only today the prize was a lot heavier than a ticket for two to the "Top of the World Club" at the South Philly Fair.

Which brings me to the major new detail in the place. He lay sprawled in a chair under the chipped sign that read "no sleeping at the tables," one foot kicked to the side like a drunken card player. He was the owner and local "talent scout" Binky Sans.

His presence wasn't new, his state of being was. Slick red was pooled in a crevasse above his round gut, his large head and tongue drooped sideways at a distracting angle and a girl's kind of gun just kissed the grimy floor in his chubby, manicured hand. The pose suited him fine.

A gung ho Uniform whose name I had already forgotten marched through the door at me with his sleeves cuffed above the elbow. I stuffed the pastry in my mouth. He held up two small slips of white paper, each with a name on it and a message in block letters.

"Two calls came over the radio for you, sir," he said with the anger of the competent order-follower.

One was the wife-to-be. Her message said, CALL ME RIGHT AWAY. The other was the Lieutenant. His message: HALT INVESTIGATION PENDING MY ARRIVAL.

I laughed at the one in a million moment. They almost seemed to agree. But even a chaotic universe has cruel coincidences. Nikki should know better when I'm on a case, even today. And the boss? He's never believed anyone named Marvin Reddy could handle a body on his own. He was just exercising his trademark cynicism.

The world may never surprise that man, but today, for Nikki, I was determined that I would. And anyway this was a case full of facts I already knew and players who couldn't lie to me. Tomorrow I get married, today I get divorced. Sometimes God is good. I crumpled both pages into a ball with my Ring Ding wrapper and threw it all across the floor.

"They all say suicide, Marv," Andy Lovell said when I left the counter.

Lovell, we call him Shoe Shine because of the patent leathers, is my partner. And "they all?" If you're from South Philly, trust me, you'll never escape "they all."

"Suicide. Right," I said. "Binky had more people who owed him or needed him or hated him than any guy I ever knew. Scratch suicide. Let's talk it out again before the boss comes and fucks it all up."

I made my way to the collection of cappuccino-sized tables in the rear where CC Durante, Kat Winthrop, Delli Delano, and Becky Howell looked like they had been waiting for me since the senior year. If you wait for anyone in that place it's a pretty formal thing. The building was once an absurdly narrow row home, which meant any customers got crammed together like a fat girl's bottom teeth. I don't think it was my imagination that this group of regulars seemed a little too at ease sharing that space with a very large dead man.

I walked across the worn red tiles.

"How's that sweet Nikki," CC said loudly. He leaned against a cigarette machine, looking pretty and not smoking. His tan was darker than half the Blacks in the city and his foolish hairdo resembled what I'd heard Puerto Rican girls call a baldee: slick across his head, pulled into a long ponytail in the back. "CC" is for his movie name, Cool Cucumber. Binky's kind of movies.

He smiled. I didn't.

"I still think about her," he went on, smiling. "She was a French Black, like the kind from New Orleans or Europe. Man they don't come any sweeter. Jillerette – that was her name wasn't it? Before you went and ruined her. But what am I worried about? *You* could never ruin that. You're too much of a purist to make her do the dirty work."

I took a breath and slapped his mouth so hard we both stumbled into the wall. His business cards, green and shaped to his vegetable namesake, spit across the floor in a flourish.

"Any more comments about my fiancé, say em now while I'm in a good mood," I said to the room in general. And then, bending over CC, I popped the first question of the night. "Yo Cuke. While youz were all getting your stories straight in here, planning this rock solid cover up, did you ever think to mention your plans to go Hasslehoff on the German scene?" I checked the three other sets of eyes for reaction. "You bother to say, while all these nice people here are trusting you to keep them outta jail, that you got half your stash to skip the country for greener fields from selling bootlegs under Bink's nose?"

Motive, Cuke, motive. That's the million dollar word today. So keep your trap shut until I say, or you might make that shitty life of yours worse than it already is."

CC wiped his lip and set his face with a suspicious look that made me want to laugh. This is why you never poke the past with a stick. It's too easy to see just how stupid the world you lived in used to be. And this time it wasn't just a missing car stereo at the Vet, or a crate of Kit-Kats from the Food Center. Real weight was about to fall, thanks to the South Philly King of Skin. I was ready.

"Okay," I said. "We'll stay here until old Bink starts to off-gas, if we have to. Because nobody knows better than me that everybody in this room knows about this funny little hole in his chest. The one that tells me before the Lieutenant arrives, gets a prize. I don't get to the bottom by then and South Philly just got its biggest conspiracy murder case since that Rabbi took out his wife. And what happened then, Shoe?"

"Same thing as always," my partner said, half asleep. "Everybody went down with the pious Jew."

Kat Winthrop shifted from one foot to the other. Her knife-sharp heels clicked haughtily on the old floor. Yellow-painted nails glistened against the dark skin of her toes.

"Why you need to play us hard like this?" she said. It was far from the candy-coated hum I'd heard her use on the street. "You got a badge and the right kind of life now and you think that mean you know what's best around here. Nobody in this world gonna miss that man. I say he offed himself 'cause conscience finally got to him or some shit. Now let me get home and get on my day clothes."

She made a show of cleaning beneath a fingernail that looked like worn wood. I couldn't help but think how Kat always looked stained or dirty, even when we were kids. It was like her color just didn't fit. That much about her was not like Nikki at all.

"You really in such a hurry to toke up and pass out while your boy goes out boosting cars, Kitty?" I said. "I remember you always talked about sending Tommy to La Salle. How much you got saved for that after all these years?"

She swung her weight to the opposite hip. "He ain't your business."

"And I'll bet Bink was real understanding about your drop in income lately. Nature of the business, you try to tell him?" Her eyes were almost as dark as her pupils. To some they may have looked hard, but I only saw fear. "But Kit, do our friends know how you been taking SEPTA out to the North East to work those new corners – Bink free? That some kind of a breach of contract in your line of work?"

Ben "Delli" Delano, the only one sitting – probably because his feet were shaped like potatoes, shifted in his chair.

"What?" I said to him.

"Nothing," he said. "But she's right, you don't have to be like that. This ain't a bad thing here, Marv, and nobody's making out."

I sat down next to him at the table and sighed. Delli still looked like a puffed up three-year old, just more puffy these days. "You mean like when mean old man Wiskiewitz used to unknowingly donate cherry water ice supplies from the back of his store those hot summer days? It's like a cosmic balance kind of thing? Kids needed cooling off, and Bink needed dying huh?"

Hope drained from Delli's face. He lowered his head as if grease was dripping down the back of his neck. "Naw, man. I didn't say it like that. You know I don't think

like that. I just thought since you didn't ever like the guy...I'm nervous, you know? What do you want? If you could ease up and maybe get some of the uniforms out of here, that might help."

I rested a hand on his shoulder. The vintage Pabst Blue Ribbon beer light flickered on the wall. I thought of the fresh Ts I'd seen kids wearing recently celebrating the same crap brew. Nothing changes even when it should.

"Delli, I am so glad you put it that way," I said. "I am now totally comfortable with this bloody corpse staring me straight in the eyes. And when my boss comes through that door wanting an explanation about why a room full of witnesses who probably can't remember what they had for breakfast today, are all sure that a three hundred pound bisexual multi-millionaire pimp and porn producer decided to take himself out by pointing a pop-gun at his own chest, I will just tell him it's a balance thing and I didn't want to push it beyond that for zen reasons." He moaned but I went on. "I'm sure that will be plenty to keep him from wondering about the little side issues. Like why you're in hock to Bink, what? Sixty-grand for that dive of a hoagie shop on Oregon?"

"The shop is taking off," he snapped. "Especially on game days."

"Sure," I said. "When all the others are too jammed up and Eagles fans are too drunk to care. Delli you don't change, man. You're like your sandwiches: all bread and no meat."

Something tightened underneath the flab on his face. "I make the best hoagie in South Philly!"

I slapped him on the back of his head. The grease neck came right back.

"Say that again," I said.

"I make the best hoagie in South Philly!" His voice cracked.

I went to the glass-doored refrigerator on the side wall and took out an ugly shrink-wrapped sandwich with a Delano's Super Meaty Hoagie House sticker on it and shoved it under his nose.

"Bite it!" I demanded.

"Marv, the plastic."

I hit him again. "Eat!"

He bit hard into the sandwich. The plastic popped on his teeth and he had to yank his head backward to tear it free.

"Marv," said Kat. "This ain't high school."

"Then don't give him your pity love for a change. He needs to learn this the hard way. I am closing the book on South Philly Hospitality here and now. From today forward, special treatment is a fucking myth. You want to walk on this, convince me. Every one of you."

No one spoke for a moment. Delli glared at me through reddened eyes. I nodded to him and he bit into the sandwich again. This time there was a kind of scrunching when he chewed.

"Stop it!" said Becky Howell from behind me.

I turned to look at her over my shoulder, letting my eyes linger on the usual hang-ups. She was always a sight to savor, but I wanted her to read ownership in my look that day. She wore open-toed heels that were higher than Kat's and blue flower print tights

that showed off what were still better-than-decent legs. The short-sleeved blouse billowed out below two popping breasts and hid a mildly thickening mid section.

Look at Becky and you think hooker. Actually she's part of a neighborhood institution. She works slinging bacon before dawn in a diner Binky owned at the Produce Center. On any given day there were about two thousand coked-out, stoned, drunk or born again guys running around her on pallet jacks hooting and whistling. She loved it. It was exactly the life my Nikki would never settle for.

She trembled at the chin when our eyes met.

I turned back to Delli. "Say it again!"

He made a noise that sounded involuntary. The look in his eyes made me want to keep hitting him. I shoved more sandwich into his mouth.

"I said stop it!" Becky cried. She pulled at my shoulder like a child. I didn't turn.

Instead I lifted a finger in front of Delli and he focused on it stupidly. "I'm going to watch you. So, make sure you don't drop a fucking crumb. Swallow it, take your time and think about the last time you tried to act tough before you answer my questions."

He blinked and chewed.

The Uniform appeared in the doorway once more. "Sir, the Lieutenant wanted me to repeat his earlier message and he informed me to tell you that he was en route."

I put the news out of my mind by watching Delli until my stomach churned. The poor slob really tried to work that mass around in his mouth. He shook his head as he chewed and squeezed his eyes closed, making the sockets into two deep creases.

I let the acid peak in my gut. "You know what I'm talking about. Jack Macmillan Catholic High School Wrestling." I paused to let it sink in. "Coach was looking at sending all twelve weight classes to States for the first time. But the look on his face when the Monsignors shut him down... Still the scariest thing I've ever seen. It was like his life was over, wasn't it Del? Like he didn't even die, he just went straight to ghost."

"Marv," Becky begged, tugging at me again.

I ignored her. "You remember the reason don't you? Nothing got a squad more in-sync than doing a beating together. Remember Coach said it brought out the killer in us?"

Delli shook his head like he was trying to get it dry.

"But you, Del. You were hyped up that night. And when we finally chased that poor little black kid down the ally out back... I have to say, I would have thought you were going to pussy out on us until you finally laid into him. I still hear the sound of his thigh bone sometimes, like when I drop a heavy book flat on the floor or something."

He tried to stand. I pulled him back to the chair before his momentum took hold. "You actually gave me chills, Del. I really thought we were going to take states that year after you did that. You made me a believer. It was like you blossomed into that special kind of crazy that the whole team could ride on. Of course we never got to try it, but it still sticks in my head."

He mumbled something loud through the mash. I reached out, grabbed him by the neck and squeezed the balled up remains of plastic rap between his bulging lips with my thumb. Then I cupped my palm over his mouth and brought my eyes to within inches of his. It was a tuna sandwich. "I got a hell of a beating that night, Dell. It's not that the Old Man disapproved. What he didn't like was that we got caught."

He arched away from me, but it only made him weaker.

CC leaned toward us, but one look from me knocked him back into the corner he had planted himself in.

I looked back at Delli. “You see, at first I figured you fessed up because you felt so bad. But over the years things sort of fell into place. How jittery you were that night, the fact that it was your first year on varsity, and your general spinelessness in all other pursuits. Now it’s just so clear. You were scared of everything, weren’t you Del? Your own team, even yourself. You couldn’t imagine a winning year.”

Delli’s chewing slowed and his eyes glazed over.

“You should be ashamed,” Becky said to me. “You know what hell he went through.”

I winked at her. They say in prison the first thing you should do is mark the toughest guy you see and kick his ass. For interrogations you find the weakest.

“It’s too bad that little kid had to pay for it,” I added.

Suddenly, Delli’s eyes popped open and he started to claw the hard pack from his mouth.

“He’s choking!” Lovell said.

I took hold of his hands and held them apart. He yanked and pulled in fits and flopped his head back and forth. He tried to wiggle his bulk out of the small chair. His face went past the color of the old floor tiles to a kind of purple. Finally he focussed on me terrified.

“You gonna tell us about the shop, now?” I said.

He nodded frantically and I let go of his hands.

The room seemed to open up in relief for a moment. As soon as he excavated the breadly mess from his own airway and was breathing almost normally, I kicked his chair.

“Okay,” he whimpered. “I ain’t been paying Bink back ‘cause I started up to Street Road again, at the dog tracks.” He looked at each of his friends in turn, another plea for sympathy. “First I just skimmed on the meat. Then I got lettuce and tomatoes they threw off the produce docks to rot, and now I been using the day old rolls from the Subway down the block.”

I laughed out loud. “Right. So who makes the best hoagie in South Philly?”

And when he started to cry it was almost too much for me. I hated Delli more than anything then. His lack of commitment to himself made me sick. I might have laughed louder than was polite.

“At least he knows how to stick by his people.” Becky’s tone was from a long ago place that I recognized on the level of instinct.

“Now this is too much,” I said, facing her directly for the first time. “You’ve still got that torch?”

Before Nikki, it was Becky and me way back when. Like all the kids did, we paid the Ferris wheel guy fifty bucks on the final night of the South Philly Fair. He held things long enough at the ride’s apex to give any aspiring love birds a chance at joining the illustrious Top of the World Club.

But even then I was too interested in the cart behind us, which contained one Charles Durante and one Nicole Jillerette. And when Becky heard that Nikki turned Durante down in that basket, she was angrier than when she caught me peeking over at them during our special moment. Could also be because of how happy I was when I

heard the same news, but she played it like a mixed-race girl had no right to do that kind of thing. What Becky never got was that Nikki wasn't just some cute colored who lived down the street. My need for her was pain. The only way to answer it was to steal her away from the world and keep her safe.

"You know you've actually gotten stupider over the years?" she said with surprising strength. "Everybody come and look, Marv Reddy is his own man. He has the perfect girl and the perfect life. He won't stay in his daddy's shadow no matter what it costs him. And he won't listen to anybody. Not even the people who are dumb enough to still love him."

More than anything I wish I had listened to her then. Or just taken the time to hear the feeling in her voice. Instead I kept true to my decision, I proved myself to the world.

My pager sounded. The screen showed more block letters: "CALL IMMEDIATELY." From Nikki.

I slammed the thing back on my belt and lunged at Becky, snatching up both of her wrists. Her hands were still smooth and gorgeous – a perfect French manicure with a tiny red heart pattern on one of the pinky nails.

"That your big fear, is it?" I yelled. "Somebody might realize there's something beyond this armpit in the Delaware and escape. Like those men who come into your place before they've even had time to get over their morning hard-ons? Up too early to give their wives a proper fuck. Might be a good meal is all they need, but you're there happy to distract them every fucking day, shaking it up the aisle, laughing and licking your fingers – not letting them take a breath."

"What do you know?" she yelled, pulling at my grip.

"Four husbands and how many affairs? How many days a week?" I said. "And I know a bit more. I heard Bink was looking to sell the diner you run for his retirement."

I felt the fight leave her.

"You know, they passed a law in the city last April," I said. "Any property you list for sale, the DA can request a lab test to determine if certain compounds have been used or processed in quantity on the site. Now, with the wild west history of the Produce Center, it wasn't much work to get that test for Binky's place the day he called his agent."

"I knew that was you, you son of a bitch," she said. "Christ it was just a little weed."

"My partner said the same thing. "They smoke it out of hollowed-out apples down there,' he says. 'It's almost healthy.' But I told him, with a guy like Binky you always want to shake the tree."

Amazement crossed over her face. "You know Bink almost fired me when he had to pull the sale. I just needed some side money, Marv. It was for a couple months."

They all beg you in the end. The sick feeling in my gut started up again and the thumbtack became a sixteen penny spike. It wasn't the victory cocktail I was hoping for, but I told myself that would come tomorrow, with Nikki, after my promotion was a lock and she was mine for good.

"So bad timing is all we're talking about," I said. "This little falling out between you and Bink. I bet it didn't have a thing to do with the situation we got here."

"You can't be that desperate to rub a big case in your old man's eye," she said.

Her tone was just defensive enough. I wound up for the killing blow just as the tick-tung of the old door behind me announced the arrival of Lieutenant Howard Reddy, supervising commander District Homicide Unit, Mummer captain, and my less than adoring South Philly father.

“I need just three things, here,” I continued. “You’re a perfect fit for motive. Anger, money, drugs. And for opportunity, I know you were here to cash out the diner like you do every morning. Means, I got right there. A gun that’s too small for Binky’s fat hand.”

I was looking at her face, watching for any signs or ticks. The silence in the room was enough to tell me everyone else had turned their attention back to Bink’s dangling gun hand.

I smiled, wondering if they all saw now how his forefinger was curled so drastically around the tiny grip that it couldn’t possibly have much squeeze left in it, especially in the awkward position his wound would have required.

The Lieutenant hissed air through his nostrils. It was the essence of impatience. The sound I’ve heard over my shoulder at every critical juncture in my life. But this time, for once, it would precede a win.

“No,” a voice said. “It wasn’t her.”

I spun toward the speaker and saw Creepy Jimmy clutching an old style VCR tape to his pigeon chest. His forehead shined like stadium lights. I had forgotten about Jimmy’s lifelong love for Becky Howell, but I told myself it didn’t make a difference.

“Jimmy, hun, don’t say it. It’s not gonna help,” Becky said. She even stepped toward him until I stopped her.

“I gotta,” he said. “I can’t let him do you so mean like that. And after what you done for him.”

“Jimmy, you got two seconds,” I said.

He shoved the tape out and I took it like a thirsty marathoner. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s the one that did Binky on that tape.”

The door tick-tunged once more as another visitor rushed into the store. I didn’t look up because the peeling white label on the tape’s plastic window told me who it would be. The title read, “Amateur Teen Interracial.” The date was 1992, our junior year in high school. The line next to “release date” was blank. Under “contents” the label read, “Charlie Durante and Nicole Jillerette.”

I coughed.

Father hissed again.

“I’m sorry Mr. Marv,” Jimmy said. “She come in real upset about it last night ‘cause Binky made her a promise way back. But he was even madder over the diner, I guess.”

I looked to the doorway. A brown angel stood there in heels and white Capri’s that showed off sepia calves to make you weep. “He was going to release it,” she said. “I couldn’t stand what you would think of me.”

I stood there motionless. My father took the tape from me and walked past Nikki out the door without a word. But he breathed all about the shame of getting caught.

Patrick is an experienced journalist interested in issues of education, social justice and race. Often he writes to answer the question: how did things get this way while everybody was looking? He lives in Philadelphia, and yes he is an Eagles fan.