

## Looking Out

By Brian Haycock

Parko stops outside Jimmy Dee's and checks himself in the window. His nose is flattened, his face puffed and scarred. It flashes blue and red in the neon. He brings up his hands and throws a left left left. He bobs and steps, pops the jab and shoots the right cross. He grins at the window. So long, chump.

He moves on, thinking comeback. He's only thirty-seven, lots of guys are fighting past that. Evander's what, forty-six? Parko's still got the moves, the hands of stone. The heart. All he needs is a license. But that's gone. Brain damage, they said. Cuma... He can never remember the word. It means he took a lot of punches. He's thinking Mexico, it's easier to get a license there. He can use another name, pay someone off, whatever it takes.

He should talk to Morelli about that. He'd know what to do.

He walks past Mama Hu's, then stops. He'd really like a massage. But he doesn't have the money. He never seems to have money. He opens the door, thinking he might at least get a look at some of the girls. Maybe the new Korean girl. He likes her, the way she looks in that pink lace, showing off those pretty legs. But when he steps in, Mama Hu is standing in the waiting room alone, sucking on one of those thin cigars with the white filter tips.

"Parko, aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"I got a little time. I don't have to be there 'til eight. I thought I'd stop and say hello to the girls." He's trying to look past her, down the hall. There's no one around.

"It's eight-forty, Parko. You know Mister Morelli don't like it when you're late."

Eight forty? Parko checks his wrist, but he doesn't have his watch. He's not good with time. He gets distracted. He forgets.

Morelli's going to kill him this time for sure.

No, it'll be all right. Morelli looks out for him. Always has.

Back on the street he hurries the last few blocks to the Palace. He jaywalks, dodges a couple cabs. He doesn't like to be late. When he gets there, Rico's on the door. Morelli's nephew. He's looking sharp in a dark gray suit, cut tight, like always.

"Hey, Rico. How you doin? Sorry I'm late. I got held up on account a..." He can't think of a good excuse, so he just lets his voice trail off and stands there, waiting.

"No problem. It's slow tonight, anyway."

"Is Morelli pissed?"

"Naw, it's no problem. Shit happens, you know. He knows that. Here, you take the door. I'll go in, tell him you're here."

"Maybe I should go in for a minute, say hi, tell him I'm sorry about being late."

"No, he's got some business going on in the back. Don't worry about it."

"Okay. Thanks, Rico."

Rico goes inside and Parko takes the door. It's his regular job, working the door. He's good at it. Just his size tells people right off there won't be any trouble. He gets a little confused about the birthdays on the ID's, but the Pussy Palace doesn't really bring in a lot of underage kids. And Morelli doesn't worry too much about the police. He pays

people off, squeezes them. He's connected. Parko's mostly there in case there's a problem. Someone hassling the girls, acting crazy.

It's a slow night. A Wednesday. Mostly Parko stands around. Sometimes he sticks his head in the door and watches the girls. He never gets tired of watching. But he has to stay outside. Morelli doesn't like him holding the door open, letting the cold air in. Most of the guys tonight are regulars, people he's seen before. He can't remember their names, but he never forgets a face.

"Hey, how ya doin?" he says as he waves them in. "Good to see ya."

Some of them call him Champ. He likes that.

After a couple hours, Rico comes back out. His suit's messed up. His hair looks wrong. Parko thinks he's hitting the bottle pretty hard tonight. "Hey Parko. Bendo says to come in for a while." Bendo is Morelli's nickname. "He's in the office. Go on back."

"Sure Rico. Good to warm up for a while."

He takes his time walking through the club. Arralee is on the stage, moving around the pole with her face loose and empty. She looks wasted. Her tits look good in the hot yellow lights, though. Bouncy. There's some pop song thudding on the speakers. *Do me, baby*. Parko wonders what he'd have to do for a night with Arralee. Probably buy her some dope, he thinks. If he had the money. He hasn't had any of that since he was fighting. He didn't have much of it then.

Morelli's in the office, standing in front of the heavy bag he keeps hanging from the ceiling. He likes to punch the bag now and then to get the blood going. He likes to tell people he was a fighter. Golden Gloves. He says he was pretty good, but Parko can tell he wasn't. He throws a hard punch but he has to draw back to do it. He can't snap them off. He might have fought Golden Gloves, but he wouldn't have gone far past that.

"Little workout, Mr. Morelli?"

"Yeah, I was getting bored. Thought I'd throw a few." He's got his collar open, sweat showing through his shirt. He looks like he had a few before he started in on the bag. "Why don't you show me how it's done?"

"Sure. Okay. I could use a little warm-up. It's getting cold out there." Parko pulls off his overcoat. He's wearing a black sweater with a high collar. He doesn't like ties. He punches the air a few times to get loose, then starts in on the bag. Left left left right left. The bag is moving and he circles it, making it dance. After a minute he's starting to get a little winded and he steps back, opens his fists and shakes them in the air. "Take that, chump," he says to the bag.

Morelli laughs. "Nice work, Parko. Man, you just never see a bag jump like that. Those hands of yours, you could kill a man with those hands."

"I'm real careful about that. You know, I try to stay out of fights."

"I know you do. You were always real good about that." He pours some whiskey into a glass on his desk and holds it out to Parko. "Go ahead, have one on the house."

"I don't know, Mr. Morelli. I don't handle this stuff too good."

"It's all right. It's a slow night. I'll put Rico on the door if it hits you too hard. Hey, I look out for you, don't I? Always did."

"Sure thing, Mr. Morelli." Parko takes a sip, then another. It's like cold fire in his mouth. In seconds the drink is gone.

“Good, isn’t it? Hey, one more thing you could do for me before you go back on the door. Go back to the storeroom and bring out a keg. Conley told me before we were getting a little low out there. I forgot all about it, I’d have had Rico do it.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Morelli.”

Parko leaves and walks down the hall to the back room. He moves slowly, a little woozy. He’s already a little tight from the whiskey, but he can handle it. He doesn’t mind moving the kegs around. The bottles, those are another story. They break. He tries to be careful with them, but things seem to go wrong. Morelli takes breakage out of his pay sometimes, and he can’t afford that. The kegs don’t break.

He’s thinking about Arralee. The way she looks on stage. The way she rubs against the pole. He’d like to talk to Morelli about her. Maybe he could set something up. Morelli looks out for him.

But he doesn’t think Morelli’s going to set him up with Arralee.

He pushes the door to the back room open and hits the light switch. Right away he knows something is wrong. There’s a smell of whiskey in the air. There’s broken glass on the concrete floor in brown puddles. A couple of folding chairs knocked over.

Then he sees the body.

It’s a man lying on his side in the whiskey. Middle age guy going bald. His face is smeared with blood. He’s wearing a suit that was probably pretty nice before it got all torn up. Parko kneels next to him and tries to find a pulse. He doesn’t really know how to do it. He tries the neck, like he’s seen in movies. He thinks the man is dead. His skin feels a little cold.

He’ll have to tell Morelli. He doesn’t want to. He doesn’t know what to say. “There’s a dead guy in the back room.” It’s all he can think of. It doesn’t seem like enough.

He turns and Morelli is standing in the doorway behind him.

“Oh, Jesus. What did you do, Parko?”

“I didn’t do nothing, Mr. Morelli. I just found him like this. I don’t even know him.”

“Sure you do. It’s Fred Kester. He was coming out of my office when you came back to work on the bag with me. You said hello to him. He owns a bar out on the airport road. A dive. He was going to buy up some of my back stock, the stuff that doesn’t move here. He came back to look over the stock. Aw Jesus, Parko, what happened?”

“I told you, Mr. Morelli, nothing happened. I came back and he was lying here.” Parko stands and steps away from the body. Away from Morelli. “You gotta believe me.”

Morelli comes into the room and leans over the body. He feels for a pulse and shakes his head. “Oh, Parko. You killed him.”

Parko stands there. Speechless. He can’t think of anything to say. “No. I didn’t do nothing.”

Rico appears in the doorway. He stares down at Fred Kester. They all stand there in silence, then Rico says, “What are we going to do, Bendo?”

“We’ll have to call the police, tell them what happened. A lot of people knew he was coming over here. We can’t just toss him. Don’t worry, Parko, I’ll look out for you.

I always look out for you. You know that. We'll get you a good lawyer, you can plead this out. You just had one of your blackouts, it's not your fault."

"But I didn't do nothing, Mr. Morelli. I told you. I found him like that."

"Parko, you were the only one back here. He didn't do that to himself. And look at your hands. Your fists are all banged up, you've got his blood on you. He must have said something to you, some wisecrack, and you just went off. Damn, I let you have that drink. I should have known better."

Parko looks down at Fred Kester. He's not sure. He's had problems before. Forgetting things. And he has a temper. He keeps it down, but he knows it's there. He looks at Fred Kester. He never forgets a face. He's never seen this man before. He remembers walking into Morelli's office. He doesn't remember Fred Kester. Morelli is lying to him.

Morelli says, "When the police come, we'll tell them what happened. You'll tell them. It'll look better that way. If you tell them. And you'll tell them you're sorry. Don't worry about anything, Parko. I'm looking out for you."

Parko stares at Morelli. Looking out for you. All the time he was fighting, Morelli handled the money. He never saw much of it. One fight, Morelli got him to take a dive so he could win a bet. He got what, a hundred bucks. Now, working Morelli's door, not getting paid half the time. Always broke, watching Morelli ride around in that Escalade, living big. Looking out. All these years. Morelli's been looking out for Morelli.

He can see that now. Real clear.

Now he's supposed to take a murder rap.

Parko draws back his right arm and steps into Morelli. He throws a straight right with everything behind it. Legs, back, shoulders. Rage. Everything. One perfect punch. He can hear Morelli's jaw break and his neck bones crumble. Morelli flies backward and lands with a crack on the concrete floor. Blood starts spreading from the back of his head before his body settles.

Parko turns to Rico. He takes a step as Rico reaches under his jacket. Another step. Rico has the gun out. Another step. He wants to hurry, but it's too far. He won't make it. He doesn't care. Another step as Rico squeezes off the first shot. It takes Parko in the cheekbone and drives him a half-step back. He recovers and takes another step. The next shot goes through his neck and he keeps coming. His hand closes around Rico's neck as the last shot rings out. He squeezes and twists as the lights go out and the last bell rings.

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