

The History Channel

Charlie Stella

"The FBI couldn't catch a cold without rats," Joe Dougherty said. "What they are, more than anything else, is a collection of college grad know-it-alls with a badge, a gun and a pair of sunglasses. What they do, more often than not, is fuck things up."

Tony Grillo was sitting in the back seat rolling a joint. He looked up, saw Jimmy Pinto was still watching the bar across the street and tapped on the back of the seat to get his attention.

"What?" said Pinto without moving his eyes.

"He got that from television," Grillo said. "Dougherty was watching *Paddywhacked* on the history channel, thought he'd try to put one over on us."

Dougherty glanced at Grillo in the rearview mirror. "The fuck you talking about?"

"The FBI and rats," Grillo said. "I heard that same thing on television last week. 'The FBI couldn't catch a cold without rats.' The guy said it, one of the guys they interviewed, is an author up in Boston. Wrote a book called *Boynos* about the Irish mob there."

"Yeah, well, I didn't see it," Dougherty said.

"Yeah, right."

"I didn't."

"Balls."

Pinto said, "The hell's the difference?"

Grillo licked the joint at both ends. "They started with the guy wrote the book, then went back to Capone's days and then back to the future."

"You mean to the present," Dougherty said.

"I thought you didn't see it?"

"I didn't. You said back to the future. That was a movie. You can't go back to the future."

"You know what I meant."

"Yeah, but you said it wrong."

"You know because you saw the show."

Dougherty turned to Pinto. "You believe this guy?"

Pinto was half-listening while trying to pay attention to the bar.
"Huh?"

"Anyway, the guy they talked to wrote this book about the Irish mob," Grillo said. "The show was on because of Saint Patty's day. Paddy Whacked, I think it was called."

"I heard about it," Dougherty said.

"You saw it," Grillo said. He lit the joint, took a long toke and then offered it up front. "Anybody?"

Dougherty gave Grillo the finger. "No thanks," he said.

"Boston and here, too," Grillo managed to say while holding his breath. "The show went into the Irish mob in both cities."

Dougherty cracked open his window to let some of the smoke escape. "They mention the Westies?"

Grillo was nodding.

"What they say?"

Grillo finally let the smoke out of his lungs. "You saw the thing," he said. "You know what they said."

Dougherty turned to Pinto. "I swear I didn't see it, Jimmy. The fuck would I lie about that for?"

"Because you never had an original thought in your life," Grillo said.

"Yeah? I originally thought you mother shaved down there and was surprised when I saw she wasn't."

Pinto slapped Dougherty's right arm. "Come on," he said.

"That was fuckin lame," Grillo said. "You should watch the comedy channel you wanna be funny."

"Hold it," said Pinto, putting a finger to his lips. "This him?"

A tall man with a beige sports jacket stepped out of the bar across the street. He looked both ways and then stepped to the curb to light a cigarette.

"That the guy?" Dougherty asked.

"Yeah," Pinto said. "He usually walks home."

"This way, right?"

"What the guy said, yeah."

Grillo let the smoke out of his lungs. Pinto started to cough. Dougherty waved at the smoke before opening his window.

"You wanna give it a break a minute?" Pinto said. "You're like a fuckin' kid with that shit."

"Sorry," Grillo said.

Dougherty shook his head. He made sure Grillo saw him.

"Fuck you," Grillo said.

"He's going back inside," Pinto said. "Maybe he's waiting until they close."

"He might go home with somebody" Dougherty said. "He does that, what'll we do?"

"I don't know. Wait and see."

Grillo had let the joint burn itself out. He set it on the floor alongside the edge of the floor mat. "Anyway," he said, "this guy up in Boston there they interviewed, he talked about how the feds up there in Boston kept some guy running things while he was a big fuckin' rat."

"Whitey Bulger," Pinto said.

"That's the guy, right, Bulger," Grillo said. "He had the FBI giving up the guys about to rat on him. Then he whacked them before they testified."

"Same as what Greg Scarpa did here in New York," Pinto said. "The feds were feeding him rats, too. So long's they need somebody on the inside, they let these guys get away with everything and anything."

"Or they just trade it all in end of day like Gravano," Grillo said. "Cheaper by the dozen."

"What they did with Featherstone," Dougherty said. "How they took down the Westies."

"So, you did watch the show," Grillo said.

"I read it in a book," Dougherty said. "I know you can't read, but they're out there, books are. You can go the library or a bookstore."

"The thing of it is," Pinto said, "the more exposure these guys have going in, the better the deal they get. The more bodies, the more they can lay them off. You're not so far from the truth. Cheaper by the dozen is right. You're afraid of doing time or what not, go out and whack half a dozen guys. Then when they do bring you in, the feds, you trade off whoever you killed on somebody higher up. You tell them: I was just following orders. What the Nazi's said at Nuremberg. They all blamed Hitler."

"Same as what Gravano did to Gotti," Grillo said.

"Except now they indicted him for number twenty," Dougherty said, "it should empty a lot of jail cells. All the people Gravano put away with his bullshit stories, they should get out from the law finding out he lied about how many people he claims he killed."

"Never happen," Pinto said.

"It should," Dougherty said, "it's the truth. The guy claimed he killed nineteen, now they find out it's twenny, and we all know it's a lot more than that, but that should overturn all those cases he testified at, no?"

"Yeah, it should, but it won't. First they'll stall the thing until most of the guys he put away are dead. Then they'll change the rules or whatever. They're never gonna admit they got conned, the FBI. They can't let Gravano's testimony go down the tubes now. They'll change the rules first, trust me."

"Up in Boston, they put the FBI handlers in jail," Dougherty said. "The guys in charge of babysitting Bulger, they're the ones wound up doing time, and for murder, too."

Grillo was smiling at Dougherty from the back seat. "Get that on the history channel?"

"You're a real jerkoff, you know that?" Dougherty said. "What's with you tonight?"

"Wait, here he comes again," Pinto said.

This time the tall man walked to the curb followed by a short, stocky woman. The two seemed to be arguing. When the woman gave the tall man the finger, he smacked her hand away. She grabbed her wrist, cursed, then stepped away. Then she gave him the finger one more time before she crossed the street.

"Genuine tough guy with the broads, huh?" Grillo said.

"Why we're here," Pinto said. "He smacked the wrong broad."

"I can run him over you wanna make it fast," Dougherty said. "Soon's he steps in the street to cross."

The tall man was smoking near the curb again. He watched the woman get into her car.

Pinto reached under the seat and grabbed the telescope club. He opened the window, stuck his arm out and snapped the club so it was at full length before he brought it back inside the car and closed the window.

"Orders are fuck him up," he said, "not kill the guy."

"We could always toss him in the trunk," Dougherty said. "I brought my stun gun."

The woman stuck her hand out to give the tall man the finger one more time when she pulled away from the curb across from the bar.

The tall man grabbed at his crotch.

"Yeah, then what?" Grillo said. "You use your stun gun on him and then you're gonna take him home?"

"Take him someplace we can go to work on him without having to rush, asshole."

"What is it with you two guys?" Pinto said. "Like a pair of kids for Christ's sake."

Grillo said, "The mick here hasn't been laid in like, what, six years now?"

"More like six hours, fuckhead. But don't ask me, talk to your wife."

"Jesus Christ," Pinto said.

The tall man finished his cigarette. He tossed it into the street before heading back inside the bar.

"Shit," Pinto said.

"Well, he can't stay there much longer," Dougherty said. "Place closes in half an hour."

"Unless he takes off with somebody," Pinto said, "he don't go home."

"We can snatch him up, use the stun gun and make him do the Houdini for a few days? We keep his face covered and smack him around until he shits his pants or something."

"Isn't that what the Westies called getting rid of a body, doing the Houdini?" Grillo said. He picked up the joint from the floor of the car.

"I think so," Dougherty said. "They used to cut them up or something, then toss them in the East river."

"That was Roy DeMeo's crew cut the bodies up," Grillo said. "They had an assembly line system. They called it the Gemini way, after the bar they did it at."

"Either of you two know half as much about the rest of the world as you do about that shit?"

"I know what I need to know," Grillo said.

"From television," Dougherty said. "Me, I read."

Grillo had already lit the joint and was taking a hit. He grabbed his crotch for Dougherty, who was watching him in the rear view mirror again. When it was time to exhale, Grillo opened the rear window and blew the smoke into the frigid night.

Pinto said, "You wanna shut that window, please? It's two fuckin degrees out there."

Grillo tossed the rest of the joint before bringing the window back up. He leaned an elbow on the back of Pinto's seat and said, "They used to bring a guy into the bar there, the Gemini, and one guy would shoot him in the head, another guy would wrap a towel around the bullet hole so's it didn't

spill blood. Then another guy would stab the guy in the heart to keep it from pumping blood. Then they dragged the body in the back of the place and dismembered it on a pool liner or whatever. They put the parts in plastic garbage bags and brought them over the dump on Fountain Avenue. I heard they're making a movie about it, too. I think it's called Fountain Avenue."

"That's some grizzly shit," Pinto said. "To think we were around the neighborhood when that was going on. I was putting money out on the streets back then. DeMeo's guys were borrowing from loansharks and then whacking them not to pay it back."

Dougherty said, "They put the Westies to work, too, I'm not mistaken."

"You saw it on the history channel, you're not mistaken," Grillo said.

Dougherty rolled his eyes.

"Thing of it is," Pinto said, "I went to school with two of those guys on DeMeo's crew. They were tough SOB's, I'll tell you that much. I didn't know them personally, but I knew of them. Toughest kids in the neighborhood."

"Which two?" Dougherty asked.

"Senta and Testa," Pinto said. "The Gemini twins they called them." He held two fingers together. "Always together, those two were."

"Not to mention they were serial killers," Grillo said. "They whacked like, I don't know, a hundred people or something."

"I read a couple articles said it was closer to two hundred," Pinto said.

"Between seventy-five and two hundred," Dougherty said. "What I heard."

Grillo poked Pinto in the back. "Where'd you hear that, the history channel?"

Dougherty spoke at Grillo in the rear view mirror one more time. "You're a broken fuckin' record, you know that?"

"Come to think of it, Tony Soprano likes the History Channel, too," Grillo said. "I know you watch the Sopranos."

"I still get the chills, I think about it," Pinto said. "I was around Jimmy Mangino back then and I felt pretty safe with him, but we was just kids. Who the fuck knew what was going on? We could've been suckered into that bar the same as anybody else."

"You knew Jimmy Bench-Press?" Dougherty asked.

"Yeah, and everything you ever heard about him is true," Pinto said. "Strong as an ox and vicious as a Pit Bull."

"He got sent up by a rat, too," Grillo said.

"Same day he was made, the morning after," Pinto said. "Talk about bum fuckin' luck."

"I heard that, but I didn't know it was true or not," Dougherty said. "He got made and then pinched the same day."

"Wasn't on the history channel, though," Grillo said. "Mangino isn't old enough yet for that."

Dougherty ignored Grillo and spoke directly to Pinto. "Imagine DeMeo had him on that crew?" he said. "A guy like Jimmy Bench-Press would'a made DeMeo invincible."

"DeMeo didn't need muscle," Pinto said. "He had five guys would shoot you as soon as look at you. Mangino was no different, don't get me wrong, he was a stone killer, too, but DeMeo didn't need him or anybody else. It wasn't for the fag they had ratted them out, who knows how long they would've survived."

"Yeah, I heard about that, too," Dougherty said. "Go figure, a fag in Roy DeMeo's crew."

"Hey, DeMeo was a businessman," Pinto said. "Didn't care the guy took it up the ass or not. He could hotwire cars and kill people, Roy was happy to have him. Thing of it was, he didn't even need to flip, the guy gave them up. He arranged that ahead of time, just in case, the fat fuck."

"Still, it's a scary thought," Dougherty said. "Jimmy Mangino hooked up with Roy DeMeo's crew."

"It's a fuckin' nightmare is what it is, the idea of it."

Grillo was watching the bar. He saw the tall men exit and pointed. "He's leaving."

Dougherty and Pinto faced front.

"Okay," Pinto said, "show time."

They were parked alongside an alley between two abandoned buildings. The tall man was crossing the street heading straight for them.

Pinto said, "Don't look at the guy. Make like we're shooting the shit here. A couple cops telling war stories."

Dougherty smiled as he turned on his seat to face Pinto. He glanced into the back seat and saw Grillo was giving him the finger from his lap.

"Jerkoff cocksucker," Dougherty whispered.

Grillo said, "You taping it tonight, the history channel?"

Pinto moved the telescope club closer to the door as the tall man approached the car.

"Yous ready?" he said.

Grillo had slipped on a pair of brass knuckles. Dougherty pulled a piece of lead pipe from under his seat.

"Say when," Grillo said.

The tall man was alongside the car now. Pinto waited two beats before opening his door.



They switched cars on Fort Hamilton Parkway before taking the Brooklyn-Queens-Expressway. Dougherty was driving. Pinto was using a piece of torn material from the tall man's shirt to wipe blood from the telescope club. Grillo rubbed the knuckles on his right hand.

None of them had spoken since the beating. Pinto had yelled, "Enough" after shattering the tall man's teeth with the telescope club. Dougherty had already broken the tall man's left shin bone with the pipe. Grillo had opened the tall man's forehead with the brass knuckles, although he had done damage to his hand as well. The tendonitis that had set in over the years throbbed now. His knuckles had already begun to swell.

Dougherty took the Ninety-Second Street exit, then the streets to Fourth Avenue and the Belt Parkway where he headed east.

Pinto looked out at the container ships and oil tankers anchored in the bay. He wondered how cold it was on board and whether or not the guys working those things ever got off long enough to enjoy themselves.

"That's the life, you ask me," he said.

"What, working a boat like that?" Dougherty said.

"The guys on those ships parked out there. They don't have a care in the world, those guys."

"Water's like a lake, Jimmy," Dougherty said. "It gets rough on the ocean. You wouldn't wanna be on one of them things when that happens."

"I'm just sayin'," Pinto said. "You know. Looks peaceful."

"A cousin a'mine worked one of the cruise lines a few years back," Grillo said. "He didn't think it was any picnic, the way they got treated. He called it slavery."

"I'm just sayin' is all," Pinto said. "It looks peaceful. Looks calm as a pond. Must be nice it's like that."

"You ever see them shows about the crabbers in Alaska?" Dougherty said. "The guys go after the King crabs up there? Fuckin' sick stuff, man. Deadliest fish, I think the show is called. Something like that."

"Deadlist catch," Grillo said. "That's the Discovery Channel, though."

"It's sick is what it is," Dougherty said. He was laughing now, trying to ignore Grillo's last remark. "They go out on those boats in those storms. Some of them get tossed overboard from the waves. Some of the boats capsize from the waves. Some of the guys get washed off the deck. A couple die almost every season. It's sick stuff."

"I hope they get paid good money," Pinto said.

"Very good," Dougherty said, "but it's a short season. They go out for a few weeks and come right back. They don't catch nothing or not enough and they're fucked, they make dick. Only pays if they catch a motherload of crabs."

"Well, count me out," Pinto said. "All I want is a nice canoe somewhere on a lake. Canoe with a mattress, I can take a nap."

Grillo examined one of the knuckles on his right hand. It had swollen to twice its normal size. "I think I broke it again," he said.

"You wore the thing, right?" Pinto asked.

"Don't matter no more. They're fucked up, my hands."

"All that pounding your pud," Dougherty said.

"Ice it when you get home," Pinto said. "Take a few Advil and ice it."

Grillo pinched the knuckle and winced in pain. "We sure this broad isn't gonna freak about this guy tonight?" he asked.

"She's the one wanted it done," Pinto said. "That's what Johnny-Boy said.

"Johnny-boy?" Dougherty said. "Talk about a bench-press. I seen him doing reps with more than four hundred pounds a couple times down the gym on eighty-sixth."

"You know how they can get, women like that," Grillo said. "One minute they want the guy dead, the next day they're doing his laundry, his dishes and wiping his ass all over again."

"It wasn't from Johnny-boy, believe me, I wouldn't touch it," Pinto said. "Any domestic bullshit is potential bad before it's easy, but like I said, this was straight from the man's mouth. And don't think I didn't ask, because I did."

Grillo said, "Weren't they engaged or some shit?"

"Supposedly."

"And then that's it, just like that, she wants him fucked?"

"Apparently he was stepping out more than usual," Pinto said, "but the thing that did it, finally got him in the shit tonight, that was his hands. Way too quick for the niece of a guy running his own crew."

"What we saw before," Dougherty said. "Broad gives him the finger, he goes to crack her."

Grillo said, "Yeah, except does she know, did she know, what the boyfriend was in for after she went crying to her uncle?"

"The fuck cares?" Dougherty said.

"Right now we all should," Grillo said, "because if she didn't have a clue, if she thought we'd maybe smack him around a little, give him a warning, then she might upchuck her pabulum when she finds out, go running to her priest, whatever, and confess."

"Johnny-boy didn't mention nothing about no warning," Pinto said. "I wouldn't sweat it."

"Yeah, but did she know the guy was going home busted up? If she didn't and she goes sees him tomorrow afternoon, whatever, she brings him a new cologne something, she's changing her mind, she might go into shock from all the casts and stitches, the way he'll look."

"Well, it's too late now she didn't know," Pinto said. "What's done is done."

"Meantime, yous both gotta admit, he started kicking back there a moment, started to fight, my stun gun stopped him cold," Dougherty said.

"Yeah," Grillo said, "you're almost like a cop with that thing."

"Fuck you," Dougherty said. "Got the job done, didn't it?"

"Where you see that trick, Law and Order?"

Dougherty half turned himself toward Grillo while driving and nearly hit a car in the next lane.

"Hey, you know what?" he said over his shoulder. "I had about enough of you tonight, asshole."

Grillo said, "Watch the road, genius."

"Dick."

"Moron."

"Cocksucker."

"Moron."

"Fuck!" Dougherty yelled.

Grillo waited a beat. "Moron," he said calmly.

Dougherty showed clenched teeth. He said, "I don't need this bullshit, Jimmy."

Pinto held a hand up. "Calm down, the both of you," he said. "I never seen a pair of guys go at it like kids like this before. You're a pair of morons, you ask me."

There was silence for most of the rest of the drive. Dougherty had turned on the radio, but the classic rock station was too much for Pinto. "Executive privilege," he said before searching stations until he found more mellow music.

Three songs later, Dougherty was pulling off the Belt Parkway at the Flatbush Avenue exit. The Temptations *Just My Imagination* was playing softly.

"There," Pinto said. "That relaxing or what?"

"Those guys still alive?" Grillo asked.

"I think so," Dougherty said. "I'm pretty sure."

"I can still see this girl back when I was a kid from this song," Pinto said. His eyes closed as he leaned his head against the headrest. "I used to walk up and down her block so's she saw me. Jean Cassano. Long brown hair, brown eyes and she was covered with freckles. Beautiful she was."

"Sounds like a mixed breed there, Jimmy," Dougherty said. "Half mick, half wop."

"She was. You're right."

"You get her?"

"No, we were kids. I don't think I ever kissed her even."

"Jerkoff to her?"

Pinto opened his eyes. "See, you go and ruin it now saying stupid shit like that."

"Just kidding, man."

Pinto closed his eyes again. "Yeah, you're a regular comedian, I know. Give me a break here for two minutes and don't say anything stupid. Go for a record and make it three minutes."

"Somebody's getting cranky," Dougherty said.

"You can't do it, can you?"

"Huh? Do what?"

"Not unless he sees it the television first," Grillo said.

Dougherty said, "When you gonna retire that routine?"

"The both of you shut the fuck up," Pinto said. "You wanna let me relax here? Please?"

Dougherty glared at the rear view mirror. Grillo stuck his tongue out.

"Jerkoff," Dougherty said.

"Jesus fuckin Christ," Pinto said. He sat up straight. "I give up."

Grillo patted Pinto on the right shoulder. "Wait'll you get home," he said. "Have a drink, turn on the television, whatever. Watch something'll mellow you out. I'll give you a joint you can smoke. Help you relax."

"I remember that was a category once," Dougherty said.

Pinto and Grillo looked at each other. "Yeah, and?" Pinto said.

Dougherty smiled and said, "Relaxation for one thousand, Alex."

Pinto rolled his eyes.

Grillo said, "Jeopardy," then tapped Dougherty on the shoulder. "There a fuckin show you don't watch?"

Charlie Stella writes dialogue driven novels about disorganized crime. This year he co-wrote a film with Danny Provenzano about Roy DeMeo's Canarsie crew titled *Fountain Avenue*. Charlie's latest mob novel, *Shakedown*, will be published June 20, 2006 and has received two *starred* reviews. Visit his web site at www.charliestella.com