

PENALOSA PINES

It's late, I'm still at the office, and I'm thinking about Penalosa Pines. Penalosa Pines is the name of a place that my wife thinks we should go to for an extended vacation. She says that me, her, and the kids, all of us need a change, but it's mostly because all I do is complain these days and she thinks staring at pines will wash me out. It'll save our marriage, make us fall in love again, and make all of us skinny again. Irene, my wife, is fat. Both the kids, David and Lily, are fat, and I should admit while I'm at it that I'm also fat. We're a fat family. Irene has read up on it and says that it's not just lousy eating, not just lack of exercise, but some sort of anxiety.

She says, "We can't break certain habits. Every weekend we say we're going to go out and run on the beach, but by Friday we haven't tacked anything down and there we are in and out of the house, in ones and twos, all hours, and only eating together."

"David doesn't want to run on the beach," I point out. "He doesn't like to move at all." Lily isn't around that much because she's boarding at a girl's high school. That's my wife's idea--"She needs structure"--and it's mostly my fault, Irene says, that Lily needs structure in the first place.

"Well, I'm open to suggestions," says Irene.

"Great. You lose thirty pounds and set an example. The rest of us will follow it."

"If I lose thirty pounds I'd weigh less than when we were first married."

That wouldn't be so bad, I think, but the point is that she's off the point. She has ideas, but when we discuss them she gets off the point and so no wonder we never take action.

I also point out, "I've been to California. There's not that many pines out there. Take a close look at your ad there, honey. Right and left of that little stand in the middle of the photo, nothing but tan ground and dust."

But I've got to get work done this evening so I leave off thinking about Irene's ideas. I've got about three inches of photocopied records to go through and my eyes are swimming from staring at computer images. She started me on this subject when I called to say I wouldn't make supper. "David just told me you said he could go out."

"He answered the phone and I said..."

"We were supposed to have a family meeting over dinner."

"But I'm not getting home for dinner."

"That's something you should tell me directly, Hal. I catch him bolting out the door and I'm never sure what you've told him."

I take a breath and turn over a page in a file that tells me that some kid lost his license for drinking while intoxicated and didn't anybody notice he was only fourteen and the license, therefore, a phony? They used the birth date on the license, but there it is that he's been with Youth Services which never touches a kid unless he's sixteen or under. So he goes up adult in one court and down the hall he's a minor. I notice these things, and that's why I'm still at the office with the second shift. I can't leave anything to anybody because it doesn't get done right otherwise.

Irene never mentions how I'm making good money for all of us. Lily's school or Penalosa Pines we couldn't even talk about if we weren't at a certain income level. I moved up the career ladder. Parole officer, insurance investigator, and now Special Investigator assigned to the District Attorney's Office. Two weeks ago an officer made a stolen car, gave chase, the car clipped another car and sent it headfirst into another. A woman and a five-year-old-boy, him dead, her all broken up in the hospital. The driver of the third car banged up too. Part of the job is you have to pour over pictures, look at coroner's reports, listen to witnesses, read between the lines in affidavits. The worst was hearing how the kid's father took it. I could relate.

"This is another one of your cause celebres," my wife says one night.

"I'm just being thorough."

"Is that what you call it?"

"I need to saturate on this one. Nobody's got a clue."

She sits down across from me where I've taken refuge in the La-Z-Boy, pursued by her all the way from the kitchen through the dining room and into the "den." I can't believe this den, as she calls it. She spent good money converting a perfectly good two-car garage into a one-car so that I should come home every night and lounge around in here and I guess within a few weeks avoid double bypass heart surgery. Funny thing is I do lounge around in here and now she gripes about that.

"I know where you're running to," she calls out a couple of nights ago. "And why the hell are you taking the paper with you? Don't you get enough blood at the office?"

I figure I'd gotten away by just ignoring her but she appears in my sacred den where nobody but me is ever supposed to be in, so the plan went when she first unveiled it. Now it's just the farthest corner in the house where I can get trapped. But it has the La-Z-boy so I can be at least a little comfortable while I'm trapped.

In the doorway, arms folded, she says "Blood? At the office?..."

"I hear you. Reading about floods and earthquakes is a relief from my line of work."

She laughs. "Why not read the funnies? You should read Spiderman?"

I bite. "Okay, why should I read Spiderman?"

"Because all the crooks are easy to spot. They've either got eyes without pupils or hooks for hands."

My turn to laugh and when she makes me laugh, which she still does once in a while, she feels that means she gets to come in and harass me some more. That time we talked about my cause celebres she actually sat down in my goddamn lap, all one-hundred-sixty pounds of her.

"Hey, these chairs aren't that strong." I made sounds like I was dying from the weight.

"Let's get away to California, Hal."

"Christ, you've got pine needles in your brain. We can talk about it after this case."

It's a lame argument and she knows it. There will always be more cases, there are concurrent cases even now. I'm after the perpetrators in the runaway car because they'll kill somebody else if they're not caught. In fact, that's the way it goes. You catch them at the scene of the eventual crime they don't get away from.

"You think they might run over David next, or Lily."

I can't always lie to her. "I dream about it."

"That's not realistic, Hal. That just goes to show you're too close to it all."

"When you get close you get results."

"Let somebody else get results for a while."

"Nobody else does."

"If you leave off a little, somebody else good will get the chance to."

That got me mad and we haven't talked about it much since then. In the office where I'm staying late I know, I just know, that the next piece I turn up will make it all make sense. It's that fatbrained trust that leads me down a thousand dead ends and it's the same that eventually leads me down the one that brings me through to the other side.

I'm looking at kids' records because the data leans towards kids in a runaway car. This one was spotted in Dorchester and not six blocks from a chop shop. The choppers feed on juvenile stringers, act like fathers to them, stroke them like the parents never do, get them to compete against each other, work off their peer dynamics and pay them a lot better than minimum wage. The stringers think the choppers are heroes, and why not? The can strip a car in a few hours and turn all the junk into cash. The kids can't believe their eyes. They get real loyal, starstruck.

What else? The car was a late-model Camry, high on the popular parts list and an easy steal before electronic keys. The hot runners, the real pros, get the German and Italian cars and run them down to New York City. If a BMW took out that mother and son I think I might be picking through a different pile of trash, but for the early rounds

I'm going with the percentages. Donny Bellam, the Assistant DA and my boss, disagreed for a while because the officers giving chase saw the car do a fancy slide around a corner, and it didn't seem to nip the victim's car by accident but actually to nudge some room. Bellam says kids can't do that. A good point.

By 10:30 I finish the pile and I've found nothing, and I pass a magic point. I've had a week of this and my office politics side says that if for no other reason than to pay Bellam some lip service I'd better take another tack for a few days. I look up the cops that made the car and rev up the computer to sneak around for a home phone. Nobody knows I've got all the access codes and it would be hell to pay if they knew I did. I look deep, hoping one of the officers is young and lives nearby. Angel Alicea is twenty-seven but he lives way over in Roxbury, the opposite way home from me, but his age is important. I'm banking that he's open to taking a call at home from me without digging for his copy of the union contract.

I reach his house, but he's out with friends. I sound official but friendly and his wife tells me he's at the Dorchester Islands Club, which I'm guessing is some kind of bar and social center for adults. I like it that he knows the turf where the perpetrators did their damage. It can't hurt. I take the whole file because maybe Angel might need the photos to look at, and I make sure to sign out the file. (That signout system is the best damn thing Donny Bellam ever set up. If I had a dime for every hour I lost tracking down files before he set it up....)

Of course I get lost trying to find the club, and once in the door I phone Irene to tell her I'm going to be actually very late.

She says, "David is still out. So much for your laying-down-the-law and leave-it-to-me-I'll-talk-to-him."

"I'll talk to him again."

The club is a sorry looking space. It has a kind of gym area, but then a big social room still stinking from cigarette smoke from another age and spilled beer left to mold in the rugs. All the furniture looks like donations. Angel, it turns out, is wearing little bits of his uniform while he plays cards, so I'm guessing he moonlights here as a kind of

bouncer. Around Angel's table, no two chairs match. When I introduce myself he laughs and starts showing off for his friends.

"Wow, some guys are always on the clock."

One of the guys around the table says, "Our tax dollars at work."

Angel isn't stupid, he finds us a private room after a few more amenities probably designed to put anxious minds to rest. It's an office that he finds for us, all lit up, but everybody out and doing something. We sit down across from each other at a small table.

"This must be important, sir," he says.

"Your English sounds damn good. Your file says you were born in Columbia."

He shrugs, looking modest. "I come up early. I'm reading that file upside down, sir, and I'm getting nervous."

I spread out the contents. "I thought you might want to review some of the particulars, jog your memory."

"I don't need to review nothing. I close my eyes and I see it all."

He's a big guy, thick without too much fat. I used to look like that. He probably still has time to work out in the gym. I wonder how long a leash his wife keeps him on, mine always trying to tie me to the front gate. While I'm thinking this Angel is tapping the edge of the table. He's actually biting his lip.

"You look worried."

He blinks, thinking. "Are me and Louis being investigated for giving chase?"

Louis's the name of his partner, and he's referring to a possible violation of standard procedure. You give chase over half a mile as an absolute last resort, calling ahead for cutoffs instead. The death and injury statistics on innocent parties as a result of high-speed chases are appalling. I shake my head.

"No. I just need more information. You still look worried."

"The little kid, when we got to the scene, he was sort of flipping around on the cement. I don't need to see that again."

"I'll bet. I need to concentrate on the car, Angel. And mostly how it was driven. The report indicates that you were impressed by the driving ability."

Angel lets out a breath, loosens up. "Louis's good at the wheel. But we were losing this guy. The last corner he took he hit the wheel at the last second, controlled skid. In my opinion, very professional."

"And he nudged the lady's car to break free. All that's in the report, but I need something more."

"I was very complete on this one, sir, because it cut me, the kid and all. I went over it with Louis very thorough."

The smoke smell is beginning to reignite my nicotine addiction. I know Angel is hating the whole thing, but....anyway I say to Angel, "We're going to play a game, which sometimes even works. You have to close your eyes."

"I know this one."

"You've done this one before?"

"No. What, I close my eyes and you ask questions?"

"Uh huh. Let's try it."

Angel closes his eyes and I know we're both feeling pretty silly but if it gets results I don't care. I keep the report face up before me and pull the top off my pen. It's a metal pen with a little digital clock in it. David gave it to me for Father's Day, and he's out late tonight and hopefully not in the path of a runaway car. I start my interrogation.

"Okay, Angel, it's half-past one in the morning and you and Louis are cruising down Washington Street very alert for bar patrons trying to make last call somewhere else. It's dark, it's cold."

A jukebox or tape machine blasts to life outside the door. I jump. "What the hell!"

"Fucking Karaoke," says Angel, but he keeps his eyes closed. "Big new idea."

"Okay. What are you seeing, Angel?"

"The Camry."

"Okay, good. Now, like a movie, a replay, just let it come."

"The car's sticking out in the intersection, kind of arrogant. We approach, and it all of a sudden shoots across."

The perp got nervous, I think to observe, but I say instead, "Go on."

"After crossing, it slows down right off and Louis slows and says What the hell and I make the plate. We slow more and I see it pull into an alley but just stay there."

"What alley?"

"Well, just the first one off Boylston Street."

"Go on."

Angel opens his eyes briefly, but I jab my pen at him and he closes them again.

"Well, I call in the plate..."

"No, you asked Louis if you should."

"Right, okay, you want everything. I ask Louis and he says What the hell call it in. I call it in and zip, it'd been reported just an hour before. We circle the block and come up from the other side but I guess we got spotted because when we get to the alley we catch his tail lights on the other end. We see him go left and Louis goes straight to Washington Street. He goes right and we flip the lights and head for him, but he pulls away fast."

"Okay, freeze the moment, just when you feel it's putting more distance between you."

"Uh huh."

"Okay. Any heads in the back seat?"

"Pretty sure no."

"Okay, fix on side view mirrors. Any faces?"

Angel grimaces. "Shit, I can't remember."

"Okay, stay with the side view mirrors. Do you see a glimpse of a face? You keep saying 'him,' did you actually see a male face? Driver's side, passenger's side?"

"Gosh, I must be no good at this."

"This only works one time in a hundred, Angel. Relax. Now, glimpse of a face in a mirror?"

Angel screws up his eyes, shrugs. "Nope."

"Open windows, hands or elbows, either side?"

"No sir."

"Okay, Angel, let it go again. It's pulling away and you're at the turnoff by the subway station."

"Right. It looks like it's going through and Louis doesn't let up, then it goes hard right and does a four-wheel slide, then fishes towards the hill and we lose sight..."

"Not 'we,' Angel. Be looking through *your* eyes only. Okay? Now, freeze it just as it moves past the subway bridge and your view is blocked. Got it?"

"Yeah, I see it."

Dammit if somebody doesn't burst into the office. He says one word, sees Angel and me, and backs out. "You've got some explaining to do," I say.

"I still got the car," says Angel, eyes still closed. He leans forward, head in hands.

"Good man. Now, the car's broadside to you. Any silhouette?"

"I don't think so. Reflections off the glass, that's all."

"What about oncoming headlights to shine through?"

"No. It's just him and us in the intersection."

"Okay, let it go beyond the subway support. Now, you come around the support. What are you seeing?"

Angel takes a breath. "Here it gets nasty. The Camry's going down the hill, coming up fast behind another vehicle, a Honda crossover. It gets around the right hand side of it and I can see the Honda's freaked. It's slowing and edging left but a third vehicle, a Chevy sedan's coming the other way. The Camry clips the Honda, bang, once, real hard, and a spray of gas flies up. The Honda goes left, catches the rear of the sedan. The Honda spins, hits some kind construction barrier and goes into a column. The door springs open and the kid flies out." Angel opens his eyes. "Fuck!"

"Hold on, Angel." I actually pat him on the arm, he's doing so good and I know it's hard for him. "You and Louis stopped to lend assistance, right? Close those eyes again."

Angel bows his head and rests his face in his hands. "Louis sends me and stays to call for the ambulance. I rush up and I see the kid on the sidewalk. I start for the kid. I can't see the woman at first because she's behind the bags.

"Okay, freeze again, Angel. Now listen carefully. What are you hearing?" I think he's hearing the damn Karaoke and I wish I'd decided to wait for some quieter space, but he looks like he's concentrating pretty well.

"I'm hearing the kid's foot scraping on the ground."

"And what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I should grab him and get him into the car and get to the Faulkner fast."

"Why?"

"He's hurting badly."

"Right, but there's an ambulance service not two blocks away, right down Rossmore Road. Louis's report says he determined that immediately."

"Yes sir, but I'm worried, at the scene I mean. You told me to just let it go."

"Angel, you're absolutely a hundred percent right. You're worried, you're staring at the kid and you're worried. What are you worried about?"

"That he's going to die."

"Not yet you're not. He's moving."

"No, sir, I'm definitely worried he's going to die. He shouldn't have been in the fucking front seat is what it is. Ejected, no belt."

"He looks that bad."

"He's arching his back, very sharp. And there could be a fire. I saw the gas go out."

"Right, and the kid's near the car and it could go up in flames any minute."

"I think so."

"There's gas sloshing out of the Honda's tank?"

He pauses. "No."

"You smell gas?"

Angel thinks a moment, frowns. "I think so, sir. I'm not sure."

I pause and think myself. "You saw the gas go out. Keep your eyes closed! The Camry clips the Honda and, poom!, the Honda collides with the sedan, the kid gets thrown out, you jump out and think I've gotta get the kid out of here."

"But that's what's bothering me, sir. I can't remember smelling any gas, just afraid of a fire."

"Okay, concentrate, what's on the road surface? Moisture, glass, metal trim?"

"There's glass."

"Did the windows go on the Honda." I flip through the photos quietly. The Honda's lost two windows and the ground is sprayed with shattered glass. "Okay, back now to where the Camry hits the Honda. Glass fragments spray out. Does that read?"

Angel squirms and opens his eyes. For a moment we just stare at each other, our foreheads scrunched. "Maybe it was a headlight from the Camry," he says.

My eyes are burning from fatigue. "It's okay," I say. "At some point you realize it's glass, nothing flammable, so you back off in your head and let the EMTs handle it."

"I think that's right, sir."

"Thanks, pal. I might be back in touch."

When I get home Irene's in bed and probably asleep but I make a lot of little noises on purpose in the bathroom. I drop my toothbrush, turn the water on harder than necessary, leave the door open a crack. It works because I find her roused when I oh so quietly slip into bed.

"What were you doing in there?" she says. "Wrestling with a monkey?"

"Sorry, honey. How are you?"

She puts her fat arms around me and I'm surprised how much I like it. And what about her, doesn't she care that I'm fat? I'm loving Angel for trying so hard, but I'm hating him for *being* so hard. I mean, if Irene went to the Dorchester Islands Club with me she might get ideas after laying eyes on a trim kid like Angel. But then he wouldn't give her the time of day, her being so fat. So I guess it makes sense. The fat really is a protective layer, in the best sense of the word. Anyway, at the moment, all I'm thinking is that it's great to be home and to have a home and all that.

"What time did David finally get it?"

She sighs. "Close to midnight. I told him you were going to give him a talking to."

"What'd he say to that?"

"He said he's call you for an appointment."

"Wow, he said that?"

"No, I made that up."

"Very funny."

"I thought it was appropriate. But if you had more than fifteen minutes contact with him a month, he might stay home once in a while instead of coming in at One A.M. and only fourteen."

"Fourteen! Is that how old he is?"

Irene laughs a little herself. Then she shakes me all at once. "Hey, are you falling asleep?"

"Are you kidding?" Actually, I was.

"You're falling asleep right after waking me up?"

That's the last thing I remember her saying. Minutes later I'm dreaming about that poor cop standing like a stone with a kid going down fast right before his eyes.

At breakfast the next morning I beat Irene to the punch by bringing up one of our touchy subjects before she makes her choice. "This Penalosa Pines," I say, watching her where she's standing by the toaster. "How about right after this case?"

She eyes me, looking for the catch. "After it's solved or after it's shelved?"

"Come on, honey. Either, of course."

"Okay, but you better mean it."

I don't like the way she says that, so I challenge. "I better mean it or what?"

"Or I'll take David, and Lily if she wants to come, and we'll go without you."

"Is that right?"

"That's right. And while I'm there without you I'll be thinking hard whether it might not be so bad to be without you, permanent."

"Oh, that's sweet."

David comes down and doesn't meet my eye. He gaggles around at the head of the table, slapping at the toast, not sitting down. We launch into a father-son mudsling, totally ineffectual in my opinion. I mean, either of us could've written this script in our sleep.

"I hear you were late getting home last night."

"Only an hour. I kept trying to get Billy to leave the restaurant, but they were still eating."

"So it's Billy's fault."

"He's the one with the car, Dad." He sits down with a heavy plop.

"Yeah, but you can't open your mouth and say to everybody Hey, let's not get anything more to eat because I've got to be home soon?"

He doesn't get this. "What?"

"Never mind. So, what do I do? Do I say you can't go out with Billy and the rest again? Is that what I have to do?"

In an attempt to be nonchalant he pours way too much milk on his cereal. It almost sloshes out of the other side of the bowl and he jerks and turns red. His embarrassment of course turns me into instant mush. He gets angry at himself and so talks tougher. "We were there plenty early to eat, if we had a decent waitress or cook or something."

Irene walks over and stands by the table and, looking at David, says, "What your father is trying to say is that the next time you come home late he's going to take you over his knee and whack your behind till it's black and blue."

David sniggers and glances at me. "Is *that* what you mean?"

"Guess so," I say, and Irene groans and walks back to the toaster. "And for this time," I add quickly, "you're grounded for a week."

Right away he wails at me. "Dad, the concert!"

Irene rolls her eyes because this concert plan has been in the works for some time. I toss my head, devil may care, and say, "Slipped my mind. Anyway, starting the day after, you're grounded for a week."

Now he doesn't seem too worried about the grounding, he probably figures I'll forget and I'm sure he can't even imagine life after the concert.

"Remember, Dad. I'll be at Jay's. Quarter to seven."

As I'm heading for the door, Irene says "You'd better be on time, Hal. With all this talk about him getting home on time, you'd better set a good example."

"Don't worry." I almost ask why she isn't doing the driving, and then I remember that she's on the parents' committee at Lily's school that night. That much I remember, but I can't quite remember if I'm supposed to do something else after dropping David off in Providence. Like, am I supposed to wait in the car, or what is the plan? I'll have to keep alert for clues.

Before I have my morning coffee briefing with Donny Bellam, I put in a call to Angel and then to his partner, Louis. I have a few questions for them that I want to put before I meet with Donny. I can't locate Angel, but I catch Louis at home. I get seven intense minutes with him and a couple of interesting bits of new information. Then I try to get through to the guy driving the car that the victim was forced to collide with. He came out of it with a bruised shoulder and a solid crack on the head, and the doctor's real protective so I haven't had a chance to talk to him. I reach his wife and she says it might be okay to talk to him now, he's back home but he's sleeping at the moment. I leave my number with her, again. Then I buzz Donny and he's ready so I go down and buy a few minutes of thinking time picking up coffee in the cafeteria. Then I'm upstairs in Donny's office.

The guy's something of a pisser, a dandy in fact. I haven't seen a mustache like his since the last time I paged through a book of Norman Rockwell pictures. He must get up early to get those pointy ends right. He sits back in his chair with his forearms straight out on the table like he'd prefer a throne. But I can't knock his ambition because first of all he's now Assistant DA and second he's pretty good at his job. What I don't like is the way he keeps switching priorities on me, like which case is most important for example. For sure he's being pushed around himself by bureaucrats and political flunkys. I figure as long as I get results I should just be able to nod a lot and promise a lot then go off and do what I need to.

This morning he says, "Hal, you look green." He brings his coffee cup all the way up to his mouth, not bending his head an inch. Regal.

"The hit-and-run, it's eating at me."

"Yeah, it stinks. Do you have anybody lined up?"

"No, but I took a page out of your book. I questioned one of the reporting officers last night to follow up on the fancy driving. Then I got back to him and his partner this morning first thing."

Donny's eyebrows go up. "That's good. Anything come of that?" The cup comes up to his mouth again.

An old familiar feeling starts up in my belly. Irene would have a name for it. I'm about to put something to Donny and if he doesn't decide to act on it I don't know what we can do about that guy who killed that woman. But you have to try. "Donny, the officer I questioned had a pretty good recall and he put me on to something. When the perpetrator clipped the victim's car, a spray of liquid went up. He thought it was gas but he can't remember smelling any. I still need to check the victim's car, see if its tank was ruptured, but I'm pretty sure now the spray was water. The other officer seems to remember now that the car might have been wet all along."

"Was it raining that night?"

"No, so I think the perpetrators--you're going to love this--I think the perps might have washed the car. You know, make it look pretty to get a few extra bucks out of it."

"I don't see it, pros washing a car."

"But it was a really good car, good paint, probably a six-cylinder, given the easy acceleration. They might have wanted to maximize on a solid item."

"But it still had the bad plate on it."

"I know. To me, it's just the right mix of professionalism and stupidity. Kind of makes you hopeful you might catch the jerk."

Donny looks away for a moment out of the window of his office, which used to look out onto downtown Boston but now stares into a grid of high-rise windows. "If the car was still wet, it had to have been recently washed. The washes attached to gas stations stay open late."

"That's one way I'd go, but they might have washed it right out in front of somebody's house."

"Do you really think this is worth pursuing?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"What would you need?"

I take a breath. "Some time to check a few things out. The car washes, and then a few guys on the nearby streets or on phones to ask if anyone saw somebody washing a car in the middle of a cold night."

Donny brings one hand up to his face and pulls at the ends of his mustache. "Okay, but I wouldn't spend more than another two days on it." Then he pushes two papers aside and I see my assignment sheet before him. Let him start, I'm a step ahead of him.

"The Gilmore Street arson, where's that?"

"Where Fire left it. That's on them, Donny. I can't do anything till they get back to me, and I've left a pile of messages already."

"Uh huh. And the B&Es on Steed Street?"

That gut feeling kicks up again. I'm strictly backup for MacNulty on that one, and MacNulty is doing the usual song-and-dance. I heard him on the phone earlier in the week with one of the victims. He tells them all the things he *can't* do--can't do fingerprints, can't do door-to-door, can't follow up on soft leads. The victims in the neighborhood actually came up with a *name* for Christ's sake from some local kids, and there's MacNulty on the phone telling them he can't just walk up to the alleged perpetrator and question him. Why the hell not? I want to throw up. What I hear myself telling Donny is, "MacNulty's got a name he's following up on. He doesn't need me just yet." This always happens, me not being able to vent about MacNulty and other incompetents, just sneaking key pieces of information to Donny instead. I figure Donny'll ask MacNulty about the name and that might have its effect. What else are you going to do? I see some of the cops lounging around the precincts. The union's weakening, there's no lab support anymore, so the ranks are thinning. They have the choice to do a half-assed job or none at all. It becomes learned behavior, the routines they pull on the public, all of them master placators. That's what the police are now, Public Placators.

Still, MacNulty's got a goddam *name*, for Christ's sake. The last thing I heard him say on that phone was "Keep me posted. The best information we get comes right out of the neighborhoods." That's the new buzz word, neighborhoods. The Mayor got elected on that plank and we cops have picked up on it quick.

I get the go-ahead from Donny and after fielding a few inconsequential calls I search the Web for car washes that stay open late but they all close at midnight. Even if the perpetrator washed the car at the last possible moment, it would have had to be dry by the time of the crime. At lunch I'm mulling this all over with Johnny Sidescki and he puts me onto a self-service car wash that stay opens way late. So I poke around but find out that it doesn't stay open late enough.

I can't believe it but Donny gives me the green light to print up a few hundred flyers asking did anyone see a guy washing a black Camry very late on the night of, except I've got to do all the copying myself and on our cruddy office copier. He won't sign a voucher for doing it on the outside. No budget line. I get the picture; he thinks the flyer idea is cracked and he's just humoring me. Between calls and follow-ups on my other items, the pile of flyers grows very slowly and somebody or other keeps coming up to use the machine and I've got to stop and then I've got a phone call, and you get the picture. But one of the calls is the driver of that other car. I've got only one question for him: During that split second when the perpetrator forced the Honda into his lane, did he get a look through the windshield of the Camry? It's a one in a thousand shot. By all rights the guy's eyes would be glued to the car about to collide with him, but I almost fall out of my chair when he answers that he absolutely did get a look at the perpetrator, and a good one. He saw the whole thing coming, the Camry coming up fast, and at one point, thirty feet down the road, it passed under a street lamp. He describes a single individual, male, about forty-five, with dark curly hair. "I think it had some gray in it," he adds. "That man's image was strobed into my brain."

I want to blow him a kiss over the phone. "Any guess on the nationality?" I ask. He thinks Italian, maybe Middle Eastern. I get more details: high cheekbones, strong short forearms, a dark t-shirt. This is solid.

I get a quick cup of coffee in the cafeteria around four and there's MacNulty and his crew with a settled in look around the table. I won't sit with them, they know that. I'd leave the table before the secretly agreed upon time, and that's bad medicine. But then I look around and dammit it there isn't a single other soul I know to sit with. So not to be a fool, I end up standing beside MacNulty's table, like a fool.

He says, "Who're you going to get to pass around those flyers?"

I shrug, nearly spilling my coffee. "Kids. I figure what the hell I'll get three or four kids to cover as many streets."

Larry Good's staring into his cup, now mostly empty. "Which streets you targeting?"

I figure the jerk's trying to bust my nut, but I'm ahead of him. "The perp came down a little residential street, the continuation of Boylston over Washington. It's all residential back there, no breakthroughs to Forest Hills."

"So it's not likely the perp was coming from a long way's off," says Good.

"That's my thinking."

"It's good thinking. Hope it works."

I'm surprised, he wasn't trying to bust my nut after all. There doesn't seem to be much more to say, so I'm about to amble off with half a cup when MacNulty says, "It won't."

I give him a look, thinking about a dozen things to say fast--like "Any luck with that name on the Steed Street break-ins?" But instead I say, "Want to put some money on it?"

"On what?" he says.

"A hundred dollars says I get a name out of it."

MacNulty looks at me like I'm crazy, and I am--because he knows what I know. That the public doesn't respond anymore, that they don't feel civic enough to want to risk retaliation, matter, no matter how much we insist there's about zero risk. Still, the

bastard needs to know how far he's slid, and even if I lose a hundred bucks I figure I win because I'd like to think anybody would take my fat-headed hope over his lard-assed cynicism.

But he backs off. He waves one of his pink hands at me like me and my ideas aren't worth his time. I leave and on the way upstairs I think that it would probably have been a waste because if I'd lost who's going to believe that the guy who lost really won? This isn't an age for subtleties, as far as I can tell. And to make matters worse I get hell from Bellam immediately upon arrival. Ping, I'm sent directly into his office and he starts waving one of my flyers around. "Hal, you're not supposed to be doing these on official stationery."

"It has to look official. Otherwise people will think it's a kid's trick or some other such thing to make a fool out of them."

"That requires a whole different clearance. I'd have to talk to legal on this one."

"I thought we were legal."

"Mayor's Office legal."

Back in my office I call Dispatch and get Mayleen to track down Angel and Louis. They're out on Columbus Ave so I route them to the Dimock Health Center so I can catch them on my way home. I can hear somebody taking a call from Bellam and I shake my head hard and I here the somebody ay I'm not in the office. I don't have enough in me to explain, so I just give a thumbs up as I waltz out.

Halfway to the Dimock my call numbers come over the radio. I'm sure it's Bellam, trying to rein me in. I ignore it. My cell rings. I ignore it. Then my pager goes off. I chuck it out the window, no lie. Just chuck it, hear it go crack, and move on. I pull into the Dimock, roll up on a curb, switch on the radio--some easy listening station--and put my head back and wait. Tomorrow is Friday, I think, and I've got to get David to that concert. I must not forget to do that. Unaccountably, I'm all in prickles. I pick up the flyer I brought along and stare at it, almost like meditating. It's a good piece of work. The bastard's out there and I'm going to catch him. Grand Larceny, Manslaughter, Homicide II.

I wait for a half hour and no Angel. I call into Mayleen and learn they got pulled for an in-progress. I put down the mike and close my eyes and listen for a long time to the crackling chronicle of encoded pain that sputters out of the console. Later, I wake up, shake myself, and check the time. It's late enough to go back to the office so I head back in.

Something's wrong with me because I stay there half the night when I don't really need to. Fire has sent me a fat envelope and after reading everything twice I dig out an old folder from a citizens action group that just got a grant to analyze arson data and print out patterns so they can activate neighborhoods likely to be hit. The plan is clever, could work, and I've wanted for months to get behind it. I draft three memos to Fire: one to get duplicate files released to the group, another to get somebody to review the draft citizens alert brochure the group wants to print up, and a third to Bellam to push him again to name one of the office's half-dozen deskpushers as official liaison. Only after all that's done do I revise my hit-and-run flyer, to include the physical description, and run off copies.

When I get home I don't make any noise in the bathroom and sack out on the couch downstairs. At first light, I shower downstairs, get into the same clothes, and get out of the house quick. At the office I use the electric shaver and then get out before Donny's calls come in. Mayleen plays ball again. She'll call Angel and Louis at 2:30, just after they go out on their shift. I've got all the flyers on my front seat.

It's a long morning. I drive and drive, then stop in at Fire and shoot the breeze with John DeLacey, leaning hard on him about the citizens group. He keeps taking calls and lets them go long, but I sit right beside his desk with my coat off and act like I live there. By noon I've got a promise from him, a follow-up date, and after a long lunch with the newspaper I'm off to that damned driveway at the Dimock again.

This time we all connect. When Angel and Louis roll up, we all get out and stand around in front of my car. Louis is a grizzled old bird whom I've worked with a few times. He looks at the flyer and can't stop laughing.

"I love it," he says. "I used to do stuff like this. What's the plan?"

I pull a map from my pocket and snap it open, a blow-up of the neighborhood where the perp was first seen. "We just shove these things in every mailbox on the streets I've got marked here," I say.

Angel stares at the map, certain streets lined with red. "Why just these?"

"Maximum concentration of residences. More bang for our buck."

Angel nods and Louis laughs again. "Hell, we'll get pulled five minutes into it," he says. "We should use kids."

"That's what I thought, but I don't know any. That's where you guys come in."

He looks at his watch. "Let's catch some kids getting out of school. They'll run these suckers around for us."

We get in the cruiser and head back through the streets until we spot a group of five kids dragging along and Angel rolls the car to the curb. A kid with a blue long-billed cap comes right up to the window.

"We under arrest? He did it." He points at another kid and that kid drops his books and starts twirling around with one foot stuck in place. All the kids start laughing and yelling.

Angel gets out of the car and walks around to them. "Who's in charge here?" he says. "You, Brigham, is that your name?"

"That's Brigham B."

Angel comes at him, waving the flyers. "Okay, Brigham B, one of these under every door, okay? Which streets you want?" Angel names the streets.

The kids swarm up, but Brigham B has got hold of most of the flyers. He starts passing them out, but they all start arguing about who should cover which street. Two of the kids live right on the streets farthest away, but Brigham B's not hearing that. Louis intercedes. He gets those two kids into the car and starts off, giving the thumbs up all around. Behind us, the other kids are already fanning out, running top speed.

The two kids are in the back seat with me, and one of them reads part of the flyer aloud. "What'd this nigger do?" he asks me.

I look down at him and think for a moment. Then I say, "Tore up a kid and his mother."

"Shi-it!"

The other kid says, "Hey, I don't want that dude see me passing this out. No way."

"He did it with a car," says Louis. "Accident."

"Oh. Okay, then."

It's four when I get back to the office. Donny's still there and he's got me in his office just as soon as I get out of my coat. He's steaming.

"This better be good," he says. "I hope you've rehearsed this."

I shrug. "What can I say, Donny? I need to catch somebody."

"I bring up a technicality, a legitimate one, and you disappear for two days."

Pouting like a kid, he probably wants to add.

I shrug again, tired suddenly, rubbing my eyes. I mutter into my palm, "I need to catch somebody."

"Why a hit-and-run car thief? We've two suspects now for the Savin Hill murder. If you hung around the office a bit more, you'd learn about things like that. Regarding that arson group, I come into my office and find a pile of crazy memos for me to sign--no explanation, no Hal, in fact."

One of the secretaries puts her head in the office door and before Donny can wave her off she says, "Guy on the phone, Hal. Says he's responding to one of your flyers."

I perk up and give Donny a quick look. He just closes his eyes and says, "Take it here."

I can't believe the call, it's like a dream. The guy on the other end is calling from a desk phone in a library, he says, cause he doesn't want his name known. He works at a Dorchester gas station and on the night of he claims he served a man of our description

in a black Camry. He thinks he even knows the guy, has a bit of a name and a guess at an address. He remembers that the guy was nervous. He filled up but didn't come in for his change and drove off in a hurry--and left his gas cap behind and the flap open.

Even now I have to lean on Donny hard to get the okay for a warrant. "He's gotta know we're closing in, Donny. Let's move now."

"How do you know it wasn't him on the phone, calling just to send you off in the wrong direction?"

"That's possible."

"And the name might be wrong. A couple of those and the judge begins to think we're being a little frivolous."

"Donny, come on. The physical description, the gas cap and the spray...."

That's good enough. He drops his eyes and I take off, thinking in the back of my mind that I should have pushed MacNulty harder on that hundred dollar bet. It's after four o'clock, nearly four-thirty. And it's an hour more by the time I get through traffic to the address. I park down the street and walk up. It's a three family, a triple-decker, and all the paper name tags on the rusty mailboxes are too faded to read. I ring all the bells. Nothing. I knock on the door, wait, knock again louder. Still nothing.

With nothing but time on my hands, I have no more excuses to avoid calling home. When I reach Irene she blows up immediately.

I try to read it for the usual signs, but it seems serious. I guess that I must have passed some line, because she's all ultimatums and threats. Two days away, she keeps yelling. She's going off to California, packing bags now, in fact, and she gives me hell about not checking in with David about the pick up this evening. I tell her to tell David that I'll be there at seven, then mutter whatever I need to get off the phone, then head back up the street. I feel like some kind of gutted animal.

Still nobody's home at the address, and I probably would have gone home if Irene hadn't steamed me so much. As it is, I wait in the car and sit and watch, listening to the

crackle of the radio. It's almost six when a lady with a grocery bag walks up the street and heads up the stairs of the house.

I intercept her, all charm and graciousness. For the longest time she just stares at me through thick wire-rim glasses and doesn't seem to have the slightest idea what I'm talking about. Finally, some light or other goes on in her head, and she puts her bags down on the edge of the porch and stares at one of the mailboxes.

"What, that must be Mr. Lanconi," she says. "A nice looking man, very quiet. But officer, I hardly ever see him."

With those glasses I don't doubt it. "Do you know where he goes."

"Oh, I wouldn't know that."

I apply tried-and-true interrogation technique. Has she ever seen him in the company of one of their neighbors? Has she ever seen him coming out of, or standing in front of, one of the local establishments? Things like that. I impress upon her the importance of anything she might remember.

After a while she brightens. "Oh, yes!"

So I get the name of a bar just a block away and hope she isn't too blind to get it all right. It's just two blocks away, but on the way I call in the accurate name so that Donny can get me the warrant. He's probably on his way home, but they'll page him. He'd never throw his beeper away.

The place is the Hillcrest Cafe. Inside there's a long bar, a TV set going with the last of the six o'clock news, and a knot of working stiffs at the far end. I sit down by myself at the near end and wait. The bartender has to come all the way down to me. He's a big guy with hair so tight and black it looks inked on.

"What'll it be?"

I lean towards him a little. "You know what I am, right?"

He looks puzzled for a moment. "Nobody underage in here."

"That's good. Keep it quiet. Is there a Frank Lanconi in the room?"

The bartender looks down and says, "Hey, buy something. I'm getting nervous."

I order a pint of beer and he goes off to get it, his big shoulders dropping. When he comes back with my beer, he looks more collected.

"Haven't seen him in a couple of days," he says.

"You know where he lives?"

"Nope?"

"Are any of his friends in the room?"

The bartender picks up a rag and wipes the perfectly clean bar. "I knew you were going to ask that. The tall guy with the red hunting cap."

"What's his name?"

"Bill something. Can I go now?"

"Yep. Not a word about this. Ever."

"That's two-seventy-five for the beer."

At six-thirty a Celtic's pre-game comes on, and I watch it with one eye on the tall guy with the red hunting cap and a third eye on the bartender, in case he goes off to use the phone. The guy with the cap on is standing with two other guys at the other end, going on and on and laughing. I'm just waiting for him to go into the men's room, and I have time to muse how all of us, at both ends of the bar, are in the same rut. I'll bet they've got families too, and they'll go home to confrontations or, worse, some sort of lifeless resignation. That's how it always seems to go.

I watch this guy put down three beers before he finally reads his bladder and turns towards the men's room. Actually, I almost miss this critical event because game highlights have come on and I keep catching myself getting absorbed in them. I know enough to be alert during the commercials, but he decides to do his duty during the action.

I get up, walk along easily, still watching the tube, and go through the door. He's at one of the urinals, grunting with pleasure.

"Ah, ah, ah," he says to me. "Why do we wait so long?"

I flip the badge open beside his face. I say, "Bill, I'm in a green car out front. Wait five minutes and come out."

"What the hell is this?" He pushes deeper into the urinal, feeling a little violated, I guess.

"Just some questions. Not a word to anybody, understand? Five minutes."

I leave the men's room, put some change at the other end of the bar, and head outside. In five minutes, here he comes right as rain. He looks around as he walks up, hands in his pockets. I roll down the window.

"This better be good," he says.

"Here's what it is, Bill. I don't have much time, so listen up. We're looking for Frank Lanconi. It's Murder II, hit-and-run, a five-year-old kid dead and his mom torn up in the hospital. If you know something, and you don't say it, you're an accessory. And nobody knows anything about us talking here. This is as far as it goes with me, you understand?"

The guy laughs, but he's looking up and down the street. "I don't know shit about any of this."

"Bill, he's holed up somewhere and you better tell me where it is. We're talking about somebody being dead here and I need something from you fast."

He's looking down at his big plaster-stained shoes. I apply a bit more pressure. "Hey, I can always run you downtown and I'll just get what I need from you there, but then everybody's going to know where it came from. So let's have it."

The guy rubs a big coarse hand behind his ear. "I guess I don't owe that creep anything. Killed a kid, huh?" He rubs some more. "If he's anywhere it's at Tony Doherty's place. He hangs with Tony."

"Is this a residence we're talking about? What's the address?"

"I don't even know that. Doherty lives on Hubbard, somewhere's half-way down the block, that's all I know. I was just there once."

"Where does Lanconi work?," I ask, in case I need to widen the net.

"Don't even know if he does."

"What's the house look like?"

I get some sort of description out of him. The last thing I say to Bill is "Don't call anybody." On the way to Hubbard Street I call in and ask for backup, specifically Angel and Louis, but I find out they're not even on now. The precinct gets me the address and says they're going to send somebody out from Area E. It's now seven on the nose and I should be picking up David, but I'm not. I'm on my way to 667 Hubbard Street.

I don't even wait for the backup. "Doherty" is scrawled in ball-point on the wood above the second floor mailbox. The door's open, so I go right in and up the stairs. When I knock, a guy with a mustache way overdue for a trim comes to the door. "You Tony Doherty?," I ask him.

He knows. He knows right off. He shakes his head and kind of snickers. "You just missed Lanconi," he says. "He went off in a cab not ten minutes ago."

Somebody from the bar must have warned Lanconi. I see I need to lean on this guy fast. "You've got five seconds to tell me where he went, or you're an accessory." I hold up my fingers, not even looking at the guy. "I'm counting." I start dropping fingers. When I get to five, I reach in and grab him by the shoulder. "Okay, pal, let's go."

"Bus station," he says, pushing at my hand.

"Downtown?"

"He's going to New York, that's all I know."

Outside in the car, I reroute the backup to South Station. I know the ways out of town. I've got the New York schedules etched in my brain.

My backup beats me there, two young rookies spry and eager to please. We start into the station together, we go up the staircase to the benches by the gates and there he

is. I lock my eyes with the same pair of hunted eyes I've seen a hundred times and this time in a dark head with graying curly hair. Bingo, off he goes! He doesn't even have a bag. He's out through the Gate 16 doors and slams through a line of people coming off an idling Greyhound. Me and my backup hustle down the exit ramp and then we're all running like mad through downtown Boston.

But I'm fat and I can't keep up. I feel my heart start to pound, so I give the two rookies the leash and they take off, one hand on their sticks to keep the things from slapping their knees.

Now I'm all alone, panting and sweating on a big empty downtown corner, watching everybody running off into the dark. My son's probably standing by the window at his buddy's house, and my wife's probably snapping closed the bags for Penalosa Pines. If anybody knows a better way to handle all this I'd like to hear it.