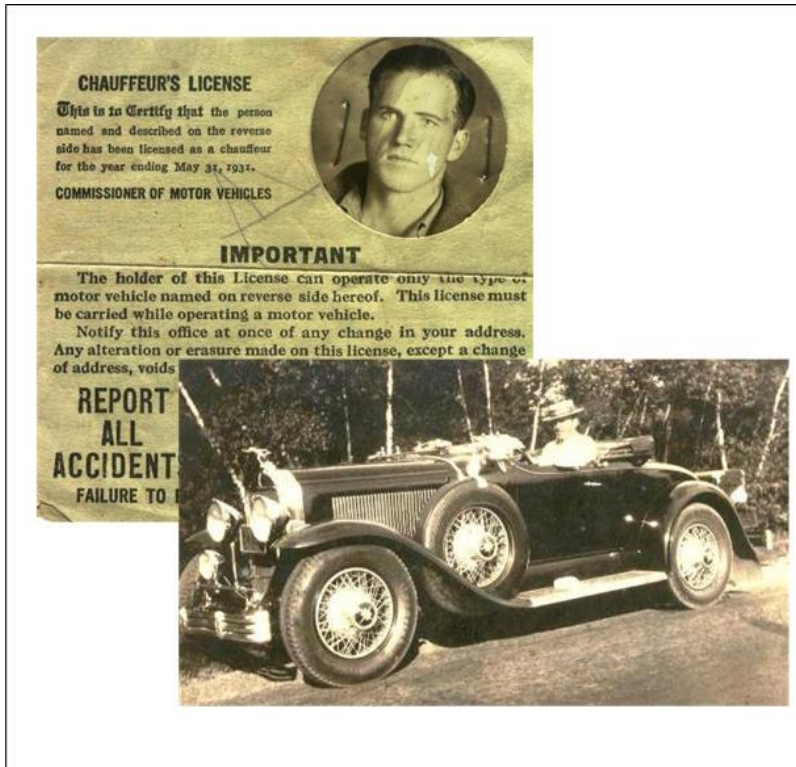


Tom in Mob



“God damn son of a bitch.”

Tom got behind the wheel of the big black Buick roadster, slid the brown paper bag down from the neck of the Four Roses bottle, twisted off the cap, and took a gulping swallow.

He screwed the cap back on and tucked the bottle under the seat. He didn't want any trouble with the police, not tonight.

There was also the blood on the right sleeve of his white suit. Harry, who worked at Leg's place, where Tom got the bottle after turning in his receipts, had noticed the blood. He had said, “Hey Tommy, ain't it amazing how much a nose will bleed when you hit it hard enough? Maybe them fancy suits ain't such a good idea when you're working.”

Tom hadn't said anything, just looked at him, and walked out the door and up the stairs to the alley where he had parked the Buick after coming in from his route.

Leaning forward, he shrugged off the coat. Then folding it so the blood wouldn't show, he laid the garment down on the passenger seat.

Barely keeping up with the cabs, the Buick rumbled softly down Broadway and across to 40 Rector. He parked on the street, not worrying that the car would be bothered by

anyone in the neighborhood; people knew who the car belonged to and who he worked for.

The three flights of stairs, which he normally climbed two steps a time, seemed like a mountain tonight. When he got inside the apartment, he didn't turn on the light, just felt his way to the one easy chair and flopped down, clutching the brown bag and the bottle. He wadded up the bag with a quick angry gesture, and threw it across the room, hearing it swat something in the dark. Then he took a long swallow.

Why hadn't the son of a bitch just given him the money? In the six months since Legs Diamond had approached him in the bar about becoming one of his collectors there had been no trouble. He would go to the speakeasy or other place that sold Leg's booze, stare at whoever he happened to be talking to, get the payment, and walk out. Simple. It was a good supplement to his regular job as a truck driver for AT&T. His style of living had improved considerably. He wore expensive suits and last month, at Leg's suggestion, he had bought the Buick, paying cash.

Tonight had started out the same as always. The little Italian restaurant in Queens was his third stop, after the two speakeasies. He arrived about seven thirty, when he was sure to catch the proprietor on premises. He double-parked out front, where the Buick could be seen. He didn't expect to be long.

Walking under the street lamp, he noticed that the woman behind the cash register saw him through the front glass. She spoke to somebody out of sight, pointing in his direction.

He pushed open the door, letting it slam behind him.

The woman had been joined by two men, one about her age, maybe mid-forty and the other in his late teens or early twenties. They had an Italian look, almost Indian. Both men wore black suits and had short slick-backed hair cut in the current style. The woman, who, Tom noticed, still had a good figure, wore a tight powder blue dress which went well with her dark hair and skin. She had smiled a little when he first walked in; now she frowned. For a moment he thought about Rose. The older man looked at him with tired, careful eyes. The younger man's mouth was pulled down at the corners and his eyes did not stop blinking. Tom assumed he was their son.

The mother and father remained behind the counter; the younger man walked halfway around, his arms folded across his chest.

Tom stared at the son until he looked away, pretending to peer at something across the room. Customers, a man and woman with a little boy about six years old approached the cash register, then, ushered by the father, walked quickly back to their table.

Tom turned to the proprietor and his wife and said, "Good evening Mrs. Franco, Mr. Franco. How are yall doin'?" He made his voice friendly, drawling out the words. That seemed to confuse people. He didn't ask for the money. They knew why he was here.

The man started to say something, but their son broke in, his words running together, “We’re changing suppliers. We’re not buying from Legs anymore.”

Tom addressed the couple, “That’s fine. But you’ll have to talk to somebody else about that. I’m just here for your weekly payment. If you’ll give me the money I’ll be on my way.”

The younger man stepped out from the end of the counter and walked forward. He put his right hand into his coat pocket and said, his voice louder, “No. We’re not paying you. We’ll settle up when we change over.” His words seem rehearsed.

Tom shifted his gaze. “No, boy, your folks are paying me, right now. That’s the way it is.”

The younger man said, “Don’t you call me boy, you damn....”

Tom stepped in closer. The mother interrupted, “Alfonz for God’s sake....”.

“... redneck”.

It was if a magic hand passed in front of the younger man’s face. The eyes bulged wide, the nose flared, and the mouth started to twist into a grimace. Before the transformation was complete, Tom grabbed the man’s wrist, which had just started to move. He felt the tendons tense as the switchblade button was pushed and heard the blade snick open, still inside the coat pocket.

Not letting go of the wrist, which twisted spasmodically in his grip, Tom quickly jabbed the younger man’s face. The first punch flattened his nose; the second crunched his right cheekbone. Then, Tom hit him in the stomach, just below the breastbone.

By this time, the mother had run around the counter. While supporting her son with his right hand, Tom used his left hand to lift the now limp wrist from the coat pocket and shake loose the switchblade. Then, after allowing the gasping man to sag to the floor, Tom picked up the knife, closed the blade and placed it with a heavy metallic thunk on the glass top beside the cash register. He said to the father, who stared back with no expression, “Where’s the bathroom?”

The man cleared his throat and pointed to the rear, “Back there.”

“I’m going to wash off this blood. Have the money ready when I get back.”

“God damn son of a bitch.”

He lifted the bottle and took another long pull. It wasn’t so much that he had to beat up the kid. Hell, he had a knife. Nor had it bothered him in the bathroom, seeing his own

hard face in the mirror as he washed off another man's still warm blood. He had done that before.

It had been the little Italian boy sitting with his parents looking wide eyed as he walked by their table. His own son lost somewhere in Mexico would be about that age. After washing off the blood, walking back out through the restaurant Tom had tried to smile at the boy but when the father started to say something, he moved on.

And there was the woman on the floor trying to pat the blood off the ruined face of her foolish son. She reminded him of Rose, the lost mother of his lost boy. This woman hated him, would kill him if she could.

Damn. He took another drink, and put the bottle on the floor beside the chair. He waited for oblivion to settle in. Tomorrow he would forget all this. He would sell the Buick; he didn't care about any of that, and he would tell his boss at AT&T that he wanted a transfer up state.

He would put it out of his mind. He would forget the woman and the man and their son and the little boy and Rose and his own little boy. It would be as if none of it had ever happened.

He went to sleep.