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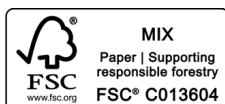
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In memory of Johnny Irizarry

Money often costs too much.
—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

If you kept the small rules, you could break the big ones.
—GEORGE ORWELL

Prologue

TONIGHT

FRONT DOOR

Chicky Diaz stands on his little patch of the earth, the clean quiet sidewalk in front of the Bohemia Apartments, thinking: there sure are a lot of great places to kill someone in this city.

There are the sprawling industrial zones in Hunts Point and Maspeth. There are the underpasses of bridges and highways and on-ramps and off-, all those loud echoing voids littered with abandoned vans and homeless camps and piles of trash. There are the late-night-creepy canyons down in the Financial District, and the creepier step streets up in Washington Heights, the ends of elevated subway stations, underground ones too. There are hundreds of miles of waterfront with car-sized boulders and crumbling piers that jut out into the deadly currents of rivers and canals and bays and the mighty Atlantic Ocean. There's that weird-ass auto-repair shantytown out in Willets Point, a place that reminds Chicky of nothing in the States so much as that time he and his buddies took a wrong turn in Panama City. A few wrong turns.

There's all of Staten Island, probably, though in truth Chicky has never stepped foot. Just driven through that time with Julio to visit Reggie who was living rough in Rahway. But he's heard.

There are the parks, ten thousand acres of hills and woods and beaches and ponds, grass ballfields and concrete courts and golf courses and even a lawn-bowling green of all things, just a few minutes from here. The bowlers wear all white. They basically are all white.

Signs at entrances claim PARK CLOSES AT DARK but there aren't many gates that close and no attempt at enforcement. Has anyone ever been deterred by a Parks and Rec placard? It's like no spitting, no loitering, no jaywalking. The type of laws that make a mockery of the very idea of laws.

No jaywalking. What an idea.

The best place to kill someone, though? That's right at home. Away from witnesses and good Samaritans and security cameras, in environments that can be controlled and crime scenes that can be scrubbed, evidence that can be destroyed on the one hand or manufactured on the other. Behind the locked doors and closed curtains of aluminum-sided Capes in Elmhurst or Flatlands, of brownstones up in Harlem and out in Park Slope, of luxury lofts in Tribeca and shitty lofts in Bushwick, of little Tudors out in Forest Hills and huge Tudors up in Riverdale, of slums in the South Bronx and Brownsville, of the housing projects that are everywhere, in every corner of every borough, even places you'd never expect—the Alfred E. Smith Houses just a couple blocks from City Hall, or the ones practically spitting distance from right here.

Every class and every race and every religion and every sexual orientation, everybody's every body, shoulder to shoulder.

This fucking city. Eight million people.

Every one of them can be killed.

Chicky looks across to the park's dark that's broken up only by streetlamps along roadways and footpaths. To Chicky these pools of light seem to increase the menace more than lessen it, drawing attention to just how little safety is out there. Even here on fancy Central Park West with fancier Fifth Avenue on the far side, on these streets that are homes to millionaires and billionaires and the biggest museums of the greatest city in the whole wide world. Even here, danger is right over there.

This is one of the main reasons Chicky's job exists to begin with. Ensuring safety. Trying to.

Chicky has been here for twenty-eight years. Longer than anyone else on staff, longer than most of the residents too. Chicky is who comes to mind when people think of a doorman at the Bohemia, residents and visitors and regular guests, the extended families who descend each Thanks-

giving to watch the parade. In all these people's mental dictionaries, the definition of doorman is Chicky Diaz in his spotless uniform and bell crown cap. He's woven into the fabric of the place.

The job suits him. Chicky is always quick with a smile or a joke or the door. He never hesitates to grab a bag or hail a cab, to gently shoo away gawkers or panhandlers, to commiserate about the Mets or the Nets or even the godforsaken Jets.

Chicky is not a particularly religious man but he does believe in god, and it's obvious that he has forsaken the Jets for some unknowable reason. It seems impossible for any sports franchise to be so bad for so long. Especially a team that plays in a major market. The major-est. And yet.

Mysterious ways, they say.

Chicky never fails to remember a resident's name or a visiting grandson or a close friend or "friend." He never calls in sick, never leaves early, never arrives late. He never complains or rolls his eyes at a ridiculous request, of which there are plenty. He is unerringly patient and unfailingly nice. He is relentlessly upbeat.

Or he was.

On the next block a tiny old woman is walking a tiny dog, both miniatures. But otherwise there's nothing but red traffic lights and red taillights and a red light at the end of an awning to beckon a yellow cab. Good luck, this day and age. Taxis don't roam like they used to.

Somewhere a car guns its engine in a way that sounds hostile. Chicky feels a tingle on the back of his clean-cut neck.

Every place to kill someone is also, obviously, a place to get killed. It can happen out on the sidewalk in a hail of automatic gunfire, the murder attempt of a coward who's sitting safely in the passenger side, random bullets hitting thighs and butts and arms but mostly trash cans and windows and innocent passersby. Sometimes little kids, babies.

It's surprising how many gunshot targets manage to survive the indiscriminate spray. Not the one well-placed bullet to the head. No one survives that. But that requires a whole different set of balls. To walk right up to a guy, maybe even look him in the eye, boom.

It can happen at any moment, anywhere, to anyone. Right here, right

now. You might never know that you're about to get killed. You might never know that you're about to kill someone.

Chicky sure as fuck hadn't.

"Oh what a good girl," Mrs. Frumm coos. Her bichon frise is peeing right next to the PLEASE CURB YOUR DOG sign. "Yes you are Antoinette."

Antoinette is Mrs. Frumm's third dog since Chicky started working at the Bohemia. All three have been tiny white yappy females, much like Mrs. Frumm, four-foot-nothing with a bosom out to there. Mrs. Frumm had already seemed like an old lady back when Chicky arrived. Now he was catching up.

"Yes you are. Such a good girl."

Over the years Chicky watched Mrs. Frumm instruct dog trainers to reward her puppies for soiling the sidewalk that was Chicky's job to clean. He'd stood by and smiled at the insult.

"Have a good night, Mrs. Frumm."

"*Ungh*," she answers. Mrs. Frumm has a lot to say to her dog but not to her doormen. She scoops up Antoinette and gives the dog a kiss on the snout. "So good."

Chicky holds the door. He suspects that Mrs. Frumm makes him wait on purpose. Chicky has always tried not to let anything bother him, and for a long time he succeeded.

The truck seems to arrive out of nowhere, roaring down Central Park West. Chicky spins toward the sound, sending pain shooting through his chest. The pain is a reminder of his situation. As if he needed one.

No, Chicky tries to tell himself, it would not make any sense for someone to come at him like this. Not tonight. Not so soon, not without giving him the chance to make it right. And not here, not now. This would be too risky. This would be too stupid.

He doesn't entirely believe any of these arguments.

The truck is two blocks away.

Chicky feels his whole body responding. His training can kick in, even three decades after Parris Island. He tries to control his body's autonomic

response mechanisms, to use them to heighten his situational awareness instead of compromising his judgment.

He's acutely aware of the clarity of his vision, even though five years ago his eyesight started getting blurry and he picked up some ready-readers at the Duane Reade. There's no blurriness now.

The truck's souped-up sound system is heavy on bass. Chicky can hear a dog bark and another answer, and classical music coming from the Petrocellis' living room on the second floor.

He smells the funk of the garbage that had been put out around the corner on the side street by the new guy Ernesto. That job sucks. But you can get used to almost anything.

Every muscle up and down Chicky's skeleton is engaged. Extra blood is flowing.

He can taste it too. Fear. It has a flavor.

Chicky's self-preservation instinct is telling him to get the fuck inside. But at the same time he feels the pull of duty. This is his sidewalk.

The truck has arrived at the corner and seems to be coming right at him.

Chicky has been in some shit. New York City was a dangerous place when he was a kid. Then there were the years when it was his job to carry a weapon in Panama and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait amid sniper fire and roadside bombs. Actual war zones.

So he never would've imagined that it would happen here on Central Park West, wearing a doorman's uniform with gold braiding and epaulettes.

No, not in a million fucking years.

Chicky reaches to the back of his waistband.

Epaulettes. Jesus.

Chicky doesn't want to overreact and look like a fool. Or feel like a fool. On the other hand he doesn't want to be a fool, under-commit, allow himself to get killed.

He realizes that the truck is speeding up, not slowing down. That's a good sign. No one would speed up before throwing shots.

Chicky takes a step backward and bumps against the wall. He's now partway hidden from the truck by the big potted topiary. The truck is upon him now, and Chicky's heart is hammering . . .

The truck flies by.

All the windows are tinted, even the driver's. Pennsylvania plates. No bumper stickers. No regard for speed limits or red lights. This truck is probably rushing down to Fifty-seventh Street where the police and demonstrators are clashing. None of that has anything to do with Chicky. At least not directly. At least he hopes not.

Chicky feels his phone vibrate. He's been getting a lot of calls he doesn't want and none that he does. This is another unknown number, or the same unknown number, the person he doesn't want to talk to, a conversation he simply cannot have. He hits the red button.

Now it's the growl of multiple engines rumbling from downtown, driving away from the skirmishes on Fifty-seventh. Bright headlights, driving fast but not manically like that other truck.

This can't be Chicky's problem. If El Puño comes after him it's not going to be with a whole fucking convoy.

As these vehicles get closer, Chicky can see that it's four pickups, each flying a massive flag from the tailgate. Each has a couple of guys standing out there in the bed. All of them are wearing tactical camo gear and bulletproof vests and helmets and face masks.

This looks like a police action but these aren't police. The vibe is more ISIS or Taliban or cartel than American patriot. Much more. What this looks like is a hostile invasion because that's what this is. As the trucks roll past, the drivers and passengers and thugs standing in back all stare down Chicky. He stares right back.

All the bumpers and windshields are filled with signifiers. Sports teams and military insignia and silhouettes of assault rifles and, most of all, American flags, thin-blue-line edition. The final tailgate also sports a big Confederate flag. Chicky doesn't understand how anyone can possibly believe in both things at once.

As that last truck passes the twin chimney stacks belch out thick black smoke that engulfs the whole avenue. Chicky coughs and waves away the smoke.

Rolling coal, this is called. Fucking assholes.

The traffic lights have all changed to red but the caravan doesn't stop. Breaking the law openly and repeatedly and with presumed impunity.

Terrorism, Chicky thinks. That's what this is.

A siren is wailing on the far side of the park, and another to the south. Chicky feels another tingle. Maybe the demonstration has gotten out of hand. Maybe the response to it. Maybe both.

The march began at the scene of today's shooting then headed across MLK Boulevard, pausing to rally at each corner, amassing numbers and volume and energy. The crowd was somewhere like five thousand when it turned down Park Avenue, the backbone of white privilege, headed for Fifty-seventh Street. There was plenty to be outraged about in this world and Billionaires' Row was a manifestation of so much of it. Institutional racism and police brutality and income inequality and the conspicuous display of extreme wealth. All of it, right there.

Spillover was inevitable. There are knuckleheads in every crowd. Especially a nighttime crowd that gathers to make themselves heard. A nighttime demonstration is an irresistible invitation to troublemakers and provocations and skirmishes and riots. To looting. To shooting.

There are counterprotesters too. And if anyone in this world is looking for trouble it's people who show up just to be against somebody else. That vigilante kid in Wisconsin was acquitted, so where's the disincentive?

What a fucked-up world we live in, Chicky thinks, that people hate each other so much.

The previous march, a few weeks ago, was a protest against the DA's failure to indict a white guy who'd choke-held a Black man to death on the subway. He'd supposedly been menacing, the dead man. What he'd mainly been was a very unwell person having a psychotic episode. That march had infuriated the law-and-order MAGA-capped dudes, the stand-your-grounders, all over cable news after the fact. Chicky suspected that what pissed them off most was that they hadn't been prepared to counter. They'd missed a golden opportunity to gear up, kick some ass. There weren't nearly enough situations when those guys could take the sorts of action they'd trained for.

Which was probably why rolling coal existed. Thin-blue-line flags too. Shooting deer. All stand-ins.

This time they were not going to miss out.

Chicky hears more sirens. Louder sirens. Closer sirens.

Park Avenue, Fifth Avenue, Fifty-seventh Street: those are all far away psychologically but not geographically. It can take as little as one minute to drive to the Bohemia from Park Avenue or Columbus Circle. Especially if you're not obeying traffic lights.

Hopefully that shit won't make its way here. Chicky does not want to have to be that guy. Not ever. But especially not with tonight's protest, with the lines that are being drawn. Chicky does not want to be forced to choose a side.

The subway rumbles past then everything is quiet again except for those sirens.

Central Park West is almost entirely residential, one fancy apartment house after another interrupted by a few town houses and churches and a school and the sprawling Museum of Natural History. Chicky hasn't stepped foot in there since fifth grade, but he still has clear memories of the lunchroom, the whale, the brontosaurus, those dioramas. On any weekday it seemed like half the fourth-graders in New York were at the Natural History. Kids from the suburbs too. You could always tell who they were.

That whale had scared the shit out of Chicky. It was just too big.

Now Chicky's idea of a cultural expedition is getting to Citi Field early enough to watch batting practice.

Up near Harlem a few blocks are zoned for business, but that's miles away. Down here there's nothing. No bars or pizza parlors or liquor stores or twenty-four-hour delis. None of the busy business you find along other subway lines. Central Park West is unsullied by neon lights or idling taxis or packs of shrieking screenagers.

It's a peaceful street. Which means there's not much deterrence to mischief, to crime. Especially as midnight approaches, and traffic thins to almost but not quite nothing, just a few people straggling or staggering home, doormen pulling doors tight for the night, depositing the last guests into backseats to speed up or down the avenue, or across to Fifth

Avenue's mirror image of exactly the same sort of fanciness on the far side of the park: the dangerous sort.

Chicky is a big guy. In his youth he lived in a world that rewarded being intimidating. So for a few years he tried to make himself bigger. He lifted weights and drank protein shakes and wore big shit-kicking boots. If someone had been asked to describe twenty-one-year-old Chicky in one word that word would have been: big.

When he started working at the Bohemia, Chicky realized that intimidating was not always a good thing. Not usually. He started to make himself smaller. He refocused his workouts on reps and endurance. He started running and cycling instead of lifting. He tilted his head forward and down, rolled his shoulders forward too. He spoke softer. He smiled more. In fact he smiled almost nonstop.

Now that one word would be: nice.

Chicky is still a big guy. But only when he needs to be.

The Bohemia is ringed by a dry moat that's ten feet below street level. This moat is protected by a waist-high stone wall that's topped with a wrought-iron fence crowned with gold-painted spikes. The whole building looks like a Middle Ages castle, but with twenty-first-century floodlights and security cameras, plus doormen twenty-four seven. Everything about the Bohemia warns that if you're looking to do some crime, this is a place that's going to be very hard to penetrate, plus you're going to be videotaped in bright light, you're going to get caught, you're going to get convicted, and you're going to go to prison. So take your bullshit somewhere else.

This time of night is when the rats come out in full force, swishing their tails through the cracks between the cobblestones in the dappled light of streetlamps through tree branches. Chicky can see a big one right now, and he suppresses a shudder. Everyone is creeped out by rats, but just because something sucks for everyone doesn't mean it doesn't suck for you.

Last year Mrs. Frumm saw a rat climb *out of her toilet* and scamper

down the hall, leaving a trail of water to her stove. This is the worst thing Chicky has ever heard, a nightmare that will haunt him until his dying breath. And Chicky was in an actual *war*. He saw guys *die*.

Mrs. Frumm claimed that the rat was as big as Antoinette the bichon frise. Now Mrs. Frumm keeps the lids closed on her toilets, always. Everyone should. But management chose not to publicize this incident. They didn't want everyone to be constantly worried about rats climbing out of the toilets.

"Does that happen a lot?" Chicky had asked Olek.

The super shrugged. "Who knows?"

This was not the answer Chicky had hoped for.

Olek's cabinets contain plenty of traps and poisons for rats and mice and cockroaches. People who live in apartment houses like the Bohemia want to imagine that their wealth insulates them from these problems. But the whole city is connected underground, and vermin don't recognize the distinctions of street addresses or socioeconomic classes. There are just as many rats here on Central Park West as in those projects a few blocks away. Maybe even more. But at the Bohemia every effort is made to exterminate them, to solve problems instead of pretending they don't exist. To try to make the world more perfect, or to look that way.

But that doesn't mean the rats aren't here.

Bzzzz.

Chicky glances into the lobby before he grabs his phone. Canarius as usual has his head buried in a textbook. This spring Canarius will finish his MBA after six years of part-time schooling. Then these doorman years will become a character-building tale of grit and sacrifice and determination that he'll tell in boardrooms and banker bars. He'll probably move into a full-service building himself where the staff will call him sir, and Mr. Taylor. Chicky hopes that Canarius won't turn out to be a guy who uses his origin story as an excuse to be an asshole. But you never know. Evolution isn't always the same as improvement.

Chicky will be the one who organizes Canarius's send-off. This is one of Chicky's roles here, like a team captain. He's the one who passes the hat for the ailing or the grieving, for wedding presents and bottles of booze.

He organizes every event. Sometimes it's just shift-straddling donuts in the break room. Sometimes it's a rowdy affair off-site. His cousin Junior waives the buy-out deposit for the private room as long as Chicky guarantees a minimum. Junior is generous but only to the point where it might cost him something.

Bzzzz.

The rules of the job prohibit talking on your phone, and Chicky is not a rule-breaker. But he is and will always be a parent, and now a single one. Though his girls are mostly grown and flown, still he worries. Still his heart skips when the phone rings late at night. Maybe a hospital or police or some boyfriend calling with terrible news, a tragic accident. Chicky's imagination can run pretty fucking wild in the skipping heartbeat it takes to answer a phone.

It's not just talking on the phone that's prohibited. You're also not allowed to listen to music or play games or watch videos. Anything with a screen or headphones.

Chicky hits decline, again.

It's also forbidden to sit. And, of course, to carry a weapon. A rule that Chicky had obeyed for all of his twenty-eight years at the Bohemia.

Until tonight.

From somewhere on the East Side—or maybe down on Fifty-seventh, hard to tell—Chicky hears a *pop-pop* like gunshots. Then all the noises fall away again and Chicky's surroundings slip into one of those narrow windows where for a second or two it doesn't sound like a city at all. It doesn't sound like anything. Just Chicky's breath and the beating of his heart. *Bump-bump. Bump-bump. Bump-bump.*

A barking dog breaks the spell.

Chicky hears an engine accelerating. Shifting into a higher gear. The sound seems to be coming from uptown but he can't see it.

He glances downtown and sees a couple of men walking up the block. They're both wearing all black including face masks. In the depths of the pandemic those masks would have meant one thing. Now they mean something completely different. The opposite.

Chicky turns back uptown where suddenly another pair of men has appeared. These two are also in black with masks. This cannot be a coincidence.

Then squealing tires and a giant black SUV tearing around the corner and fishtailing onto Central Park West—

“Fuck.”

Chicky almost reaches for his gun but realizes it’s already too late. Drawing will only get him shot. Whatever’s going down, he’s not going to prevail in a shoot-out. Not against four men. At least four. All these black-clad guys have now put on reflective glasses to cover the parts of their faces that weren’t already hidden by the masks. Chicky sees that all these guys are holding things in their right hands.

The truck is pulling to a stop.

They’re all holding guns.