

Down at the End of the River

One day I guess I decided it was foolish for a man my age to keep pestering people and I just stopped what I had been doing for practically forty years or something, not that I ever counted that carefully. No more breaking, no more entering. I vowed to toss the Coke-machine keys in the river the next time I was down in the Quarter. I couldn't bring myself to give away all of the guns, but planned to call some of my old assistants and ask if they wanted some, saving out a shotgun, three revolvers, and my thirty-ought-six just for security and holidays.

So what do I do now? I wondered, and gave the old TV a try. Nothing but a bunch of yahoos beeping and tussling on all those newfangled talk shows. I cracked the blinds to get a look at what other people were doing. The street was quiet and shady like always, but instead of thinking it was the boringest place on earth, I saw how peaceful and homey it was. Why would I want to run off to Fat City strip joints or out to the truck-stop casinos when I could do what my neighbors did on evenings like this? None of them were doing it just then, but often with the men home from work for the evening and two hours of daylight to go, people would find excuses to get out into their little yards, maybe to poison some fire ants or prune their azaleas, of which mine were halfway covering the windows. Doo-dad would be out soon with his glass of whiskey or can of beer, just sitting on the front step calling out smart comments to those who walked by. Because he

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was old like me, everyone thought his remarks were cute, but I knew better.

Next thing I knew I was out on my little concrete front porch with the intention of poking around in the garage to find a shovel or some other excuse to be outside, but before I took two steps I caught sight of the Heberts' house across the street and it cast a spell on me. I got rooted to the spot, staring at the house and reminiscing about the phase of my life that had just ended, especially that glorious day when Hebert came over maybe four years ago, said he and the wife were taking the motor home out to Utah to see the grandkids, be gone three weeks, someone coming on Wednesdays and Sundays to water the plants, mail stopped, just wanted to tell me so I could keep an eye on the place. This was when I was new to the neighborhood, and all the guys my age thought I was like them, thought I liked golf and *Reader's Digest*, thought I had plaid pants in the closet and liked to tinker with lawn mowers.

So a few days after he leaves I walk up to Hebert's side door and jimmy it in nothing flat. I go in through the kitchen, pluck the Sedan deVille keys off the key rack, check the freezer for steaks but it's mostly Light'n'Hearty TV dinners. The living room is the stopper-- huge television, jazzy stereo system with all kinds of lights and buttons. "I'll be back for y'all," I tell the electronics, and bump right into the piano. Baby grand, shiny new. A grandfather clock stands in one corner, and I think of that antique shop down on Royal where they won't ask questions. In the dining room I consider the crystal, but decide that even with Romano to help me it would be too much trouble, too fragile. The bedrooms are in the back. One has a nice ceiling fan but not much else, but the master bedroom is another story. The gun is easy to find in the nightstand, and I pocket it right then and there. A mint condition .45 semiautomatic. Closet number one is disappointing, all pastel pants and comfortable shoes, but there's an old sable

jacket in her closet and a couple of strands of gold. The gold I grab, but mostly I'm taking notes, figuring how much truck Romano and I will need when we come back next week and load up the TV, stereo, piano, clock, and jacket, which is what we do, only we wind up taking the crystal too and even rolling up the living room Persian. For the time being I make a few calculations, then head out for a two-day joyride in the Caddy before I bring it to a guy I know out near the airport. When Hebert comes back, he says Did you notice any suspicious characters hanging around or hear any weird noises? I tell him, without lying, that I didn't.

That was the last time I did a neighborhood job myself. I got a little smarter and sent Romano alone when the good folks next door, the Tates, took their vacation to Bermuda. Same with the Richards on the other side, who took a cruise to Mexico with their favorite daughter.

I was standing there on the porch wondering what kind of stuff old Hebert had in there now when a UPS truck passed, blocking my view of Hebert's house just long enough to break the spell, which had held me there for a good five minutes. I shook my head, reminding myself that those days were over, especially since Hebert had double-barrel deadbolts and an alarm system put in as soon as he came back from Utah and saw that he had been cleaned out. I trudged back to the garage, where I found some rusty old pruning things on the floor, then went to chopping away at those big azaleas in front of my house, soon finding it made me sweaty and hardly changed the way the yard looked, except that now I had bunches of leaves and twigs strewn all over the grass. I glanced over Doo-dad's way and there he was, sitting out on his steps with his elbows on his knees, whiskey glass clutched in two hands. Dr. Doofus, his across-the-street neighbor, stood on the front walk with his whiskey glass, laughing about something Doo-dad had said. The sun was getting low and maybe being thirsty had something to do with it, but you would

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not believe the way those glasses were glinting at me. They were four doors down, but I could tell that Doo-dad had cracked the ice with a spoon so that there were chunks and slivers and the golden whiskey nestled down in it, with the sun shooting through as they shook their glasses the way people do, and I could hear that tinkling sound, too. Doo-dad and I went way back, what with him starting at NOPD about the time I commenced all of my carrying on, though I had only taken to calling him Doo-dad when he retired and started wearing deck shoes and dentures. I figured I might as well tell him I had just retired myself, and maybe I'd get a glass of whiskey as congratulations.

"Here comes Mush-mouth," Doo-dad told Dr. Doofus as I lumbered down the sidewalk, and by the glint in his smartass eyes I could tell he knew I had heard him.

I stopped in front of them. They looked at me, then at each other, making no move to say hello. "I decided to retire today," I told Doo-dad.

He snorted.

"What line of work you in, buddy?" Dr. Doofus asked. Most everybody on the street figured I had robbed my neighbors, thanks mainly to Doo-dad, who had pointed out the circumstantial evidence. Dr. Doofus was like the others, too chickenshit to act as if he knew what kind of a guy I was.

"Merchandising," Doo-dad said. "You move a lot of merchandise, don't you?"

"I'm an entrepreneur," I said. "But I just retired. Today."

Doo-dad snorted again. "It'll be a short retirement," he laughed. "You'll be moving more of that merchandise of yours by the weekend."

"What type of whiskey is that?" I asked hopefully.

"Not the type I give to little girls. How about a Piña Colada?"

"Ah, stuff your whiskey," I told Doo-dad and gave Dr.

Doofus a glare that killed his smirk. On the way back to my house I heard them laughing and wanted to come right back with a nine-millimeter in each hand. I had never used my guns to commit a crime, though, and wasn't about to start. My specialty was always sneaking in and sneaking out, with a little Coke-machine emptying and auto theft on the side. Guns made me feel safe, and every now and then you've got to show one to somebody to make him go away. Instead of heading in for the guns, I dug up a rake in the back of the garage and worked on getting the azalea trimmings shoved up under the bushes. I'd show them how straight I could go.

There was a serious party going on at Romano's apartment when I called him the following afternoon. Bunch of primitive music thumping in the background, and some chick who kept shrieking, "Ooh, that's wicked, Donny!"

"Mr. Randy, you got to come over!" Romano yelled, once he finally figured out who he was talking to.

"I got some guns you might want," I told him. "Come get them when you can, you hear?"

"Guns? Sure!" Romano whooped, then I heard a clatter like he'd dropped the receiver. The music got louder, and no matter how I shouted no one came back to the phone. Finally I just listened to forty people hooting and hollering and crunching on potato chips, saying "Try some of this," and "Want to go upstairs for a minute?"

I boxed up the guns for Romano and set them by the door, thought about getting a gun cabinet for the ones I'd saved out for self-defense and New Year's Eve. I felt better knowing those weapons would be out of the house soon, because they had like a voodoo influence-- with them around I couldn't help thinking like the criminal I had been for forty-some-odd years. For example, I knew it was the perfect time of day to hit the vending

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machines I had keys to, and it was hard not to want to cruise on down to the Quarter and gather a few of those nice hefty sacks of change. Doo-dad's sour face came to mind, and I grabbed the keys up out of the kitchen drawer with a different plan. I would go to the Quarter, but only to park, and I would walk over to the levee and let the river take those keys.

I fired up the Caprice and without thinking took my usual detour through the neighborhood, always a good way to see who was in and who was out, who had a furniture store truck pulled up in their driveway, who had left the trunk open while they ran in to get the phone. I had picked up a good many sacks of groceries that way. I won't take this detour anymore, I thought, taking that detour one last time.

There was this pair of lady gym teachers that lived right behind Doo-dad, and my eye had always been drawn by the one little window in the front of the house, shaped like a stop sign or something, and the way it was covered by a curtain made me curious, made me want to know what was inside the house where the two lady gym teachers lived. I let the car slow down and drift to the curb without thinking, and I sat there staring at that curtain, which was made of some of that real thin material, the kind you can almost see through, wrinkled on purpose into a kind of design. The window was like an eye, a magician's eye, and I stared at it, getting hypnotized and everything, imagining the picture on the wall across from the window, a painting of a naked lady getting out of a bathtub, or maybe some Egyptian thing. Not that I was ever interested in paintings. But below the painting I could imagine a piece of furniture, a hutch or maybe a sideboard, with drawers and a top and a cabinet part at the bottom. If I was to open the drawer on the left, there'd be a whole row of silver forks and knives stacked up nicely in soft velvety little compartments, and taking a spoon from the spoon slot, I turn it over and it says "Sterling." My jacket has plenty of big pockets, and I weigh them

down with this delicious metal. Look, though-- where's that door lead to? In the bedroom I notice there's just one bed, a big one, but it's not my business what people do behind their closed doors, and lady gym teachers aren't known for wearing much in the way of earrings and necklaces, but they do have grandmothers, and that little mini chest on the dresser is where they keep their grandmothers' heirloom jewelry. It's a big little jewelry chest, with seven or eight drawers. I start at the top, and would you look at the bracelets? Diamond tennis bracelets for starters, and some chunky gold things. Now this second drawer is where they keep the earrings, and these here might be diamond, might not, no time to check and plenty of room in the pockets. Regular rings are just falling out of the next drawer, some nice gold bands and ones with stones, possible emeralds, a definite diamond or two. Into the pocket they go, and I'm getting that nice loaded-down feeling, the goods pulling at my jacket so I feel it in my shoulders.

As long as I'm in the bedroom I open the closet, and there are the videos, just like I figured. As far as I can tell they're all lesbo tapes, judging by the titles, but guys go in for that kind of thing too, and I think I might be able to unload a few somewhere. No one would believe the whips and chains and even weirder stuff in that closet, either, which I try not to touch. Just as I'm starting to push the closet doors closed, I see a lockbox on the floor, shoved up behind their running shoes. I pull the lockbox forward, and it makes a nice heavy scraping sound. One good shot with this weird billy-club thing hanging in the closet between the whips and the chains, and that lock's a goner. Why, the box itself might be worth something. If it turns out to be full of birth certificates and cucumber seeds I'll just dump it out and take it with me. But it's not full of paper and seeds. Well, it is full of paper-- green paper, though. Green and black. Who knows where lady gym teachers get cash like that, but what does it matter? It's cash-- fives, tens, and twenties in easy-to-pocket little bundles.

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Maybe the government gives a special subsidy to freaks and perverts, which wouldn't surprise me these days. There's nothing sweeter than slipping an inch of twenties into the inside pocket of your very own jacket. It's a natural motion, to me. I don't even have to look. I just lift the lapel and slide the money right into the pocket.

The whole story just played through my head like a movie, but then I heard a car coming, and it broke the spell. My eye left the stop-sign shaped window and went right to my rearview. Here came one of the lady gym teachers in her Japanese Corvette, turning at the end of the street, and she rushed at my Caprice then slowed way down, and instead of pulling into her driveway she swerved past me and I got a look at her as she glanced over her shoulder with a mean look on her face. She just about tore up the road getting out of there, and turned the corner on two wheels, practically. I just knew she was going over to Doo-dad's house. I figured I'd tell anyone who asked that I had been doing a crossword puzzle, not even thinking about the lady gym teachers' house, and it's a free country and that's why the pilgrims came over here, or I'll just ask them, Is there a law against parking out in front of a lady gym teacher's house? Is there even a law against thinking about robbing someone, having a little day-dream, or is this Russia or something?

It was evening time when I got back from the river, where I had thrown my Coke-machine keys as far as I could off the top of the levee. They landed in the busted up concrete and trash down next to the river, which must have been further away than it looked. I came straight home, and before I could get from the curb to the front door, Doo-dad came charging down the sidewalk toward me. "She told me what you were doing!" he yelled.

"I wasn't doing anything," I groaned.

He came up close, close enough that I worried he might

take a swing at me. “You’ve terrorized this neighborhood long enough,” he said quietly, sticking out his soft old chin. “But I’m not the only one who’s got one of these.” He pulled his hand from his pocket and waved something in my face, too close for me to make out what it was. Not until he slipped it back into his pocket did I see the bullets snug in their places and realize he’d brandished the clip from his pistol.

“Get off my property.” I turned my back on him and marched right into the house, letting the door slam behind me. I stared at the old brass umbrella stand for a moment, wanting to tell Doo-dad that I was like him now, that soon I would start edging the lawn regularly and hosing down the driveway every evening, that he didn’t need to be so ready to attack all the time. Not that his house was not worth breaking into-- I had seen all the power tools he had wedged into his garage, had seen him and his wife Beverly come back from estate sales with boxes full of treasure.

I never would have figured that Doo-dad would turn into a leaf-raking, estate-sale-going, pink-shirt-wearing old man. Back in the day, I knew him as Officer Saucier, and he was known for being enthusiastic with the billy club when he came across a dice game or a shoving match between two drunks. He collared me plenty of times, though I normally had a big enough tip on someone else that he let me go after a night or two. After what I saw at dawn one day outside the station, he started to look the other way no matter what I did.

I was up early knocking off parking meters. It had rained the night before, and steam was rising off the street already, what with the July heat being so fierce. Here came Officer Saucier around the corner. I had a bag of change tied to my belt and a meter hanging open in front of me, but I just leaned on the wall and raised my cigarette to my lips. I knew how to look as if I had nothing to do with what was going on. Lucky for me, a car came

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roaring up to Officer Saucier, and Beverly jumped out. I watched them talking for a few moments; then Beverly's voice swooped up loud enough for me to hear: "But she needs me to go out there, Vaughn. Something's wrong with the baby, and she don't have no one else." Then he said something, shaking his head, and she jumped in with, "I don't care what you say--" He cut her off by raising his fist. Just raising it and holding it above his shoulder. Her arms jerked up in front of her face, and she sort of quivered there, waiting. He pointed at the car and she scrambled in, then slid over for him to drive. As he settled in behind the wheel, Saucier spotted me, froze. Beverly was crying. I flicked the cigarette, pushed off from the wall, and scooped the change out of the open meter into my bag. Saucier looked at me hard as he drove past, but I looked back just as hard and kept on scooping.

Romano came at a bad time, right after I put on my pajamas. I opened the door, and there he stood in a cloud of moths and June bugs, hair all frizzy and wild. "Mr. Randy!" he hooted. "I come to see you!"

"All right," I sighed, pulling him through the door before he woke up the neighbors. "Come on."

"Nice pajamas, Mr. Randy!" he laughed, then switched to that polite-boy-next-door attitude I've seen him use. "Nice house, too, Mr. Randy. I really like it." He nodded seriously at the old curtains, the screwed-up couch. "And hey, I forgot what a tasty neighborhood you had around here, Mr. Randy."

"Here are your guns." I shoved at the box with my foot.

"Ooh, all right. Yeah." He squatted down and started to paw through the miscellaneous collection of old revolvers, semi-automatics-- a few .32's, a bunch of .38's, a good many .45's and the two nine-millimeters. "Hey, mind if I just sell some of these?"

"Sell them, use them, whatever," I said. "Just don't say who gave them to you."

He stood up with his arms wrapped around the box, grinning happily. "Oh, right, no way."

"Okay. So good night."

"Good night. Thanks again." He didn't move.

"Let me get the door for you," I hinted.

"Hey, Mr. Randy," Romano said, "I got an idea for a job. You want to do a job with me?"

"I don't do jobs anymore, Romano."

"Oh, right. Giving your guns away. Okay, I'll see you around, Mr. Randy."

I wasn't exactly awake, but I wasn't exactly dreaming, either. It started with me thinking about the way the knob on my front door hung sort of loose and I never used the deadbolt, and on the side door it would be easy to break the glass and reach in to unlock it. I should have left the porch light on. Who the hell would notice a man sneaking up onto my porch, especially with the azaleas too high? And if they did notice, they'd probably figure it served me right and not do a thing to stop it. I could just see the way he would push the door open slowly, barely enough to slip in. Then he's in the kitchen, looks at the dead houseplant in the window and the exploded remains of the hot dog I tried to microwave in a coffee mug, frowns at the piled up trash can in the corner. He moves carefully in the faint light from the street, barely lifting his feet, puts a hand on the doorframe and peers around into the living room. Tin foil on the TV antenna, sagging couch, too many old newspapers stacked under the coffee table. He thinks of digging under the sofa cushions, then hears me creaking the bed and snorting in my sleep. Eases the clip out of his pocket and clicks it into his .38. By this time I'm deep in a dream about golden locomotives and doughnut hills, so there's no chance I'll hear. Here he comes now, wincing when the hall floor squeaks as he tiptoes across to the door of my bedroom, wide open as always. He mouths the word "damn" at having to

pick his way through the clothes and magazines on the floor. I can just picture the smug look he gets when he sees me lying there asleep with my mouth hanging open. He always was a conceited bastard. Maybe I would wake up as he stood over me, have a chance to say, "Saucier, you're taking it too far this time," but then it would be lights out. Blam.

Snap out of it, I told myself. I finally fell asleep, but instead of trains and doughnuts, I dreamed about being awake the next day, doing what I had to do to set things straight with Doo-dad. It was one of those nights where you think that you are doing whatever it is you're going to do the next day, and then you dream that you wake up and say, "That's funny, I just dreamed about the thing that I am about to do," and then you dream again that you are doing it, but now you are even more convinced that you are actually doing it. If you manage to start dreaming about robbing a bank and having a beautiful relationship with the lovely young teller or something, eventually your dream self remembers that you are supposed to be doing this other thing, and you dream of driving across town through crazy traffic in a big rush to do the other thing, which in my case was marching right down to Doo-dad's house at first light to say, "Listen, damn it, I just gave away all my guns and Coke-machine keys and I am not a criminal anymore, so stop acting like you never did anything bad in your life and give me a chance, or do you want to have it out right here, man to man?"

I had rolled in from the truck stops and strip joints at dawn enough times to know that Doo-dad would be outside at first light, either waiting for his little terrier to poop in the grass or sweeping up any little leaf or stick that had fallen onto his driveway or sidewalk during the night. Of course, it being Saturday, there was the chance that he and Bev would have their eye on some juicy estate sale, in which case they might already be gone,

off across town somewhere lined up outside someone's door, jockeying for position with the other estate-sale freaks. How would they feel if they came home and found half their dishes smashed and all that silver and gold they've been hoarding long gone, with me halfway to Cuba? I don't do that anymore, I thought, but also thought if the jackpot of a lifetime presented itself I might have to grab it.

A gang of noisy sparrows scrambled from one crape myrtle to the next as I walked, but otherwise nothing moved out on the street at six o'clock that morning. No sign of Doo-dad on the sidewalk, and I got all set to take a seat on his front steps until he came out, only I noticed the door stood a half-foot open. I sat down anyway, figuring he might have run in for the broom or some sort of special dog shovel, but my heiney had hardly touched the concrete when I heard a voice coming from inside, and the skin on the back of my neck crawled because the voice wasn't Doo-dad's or Bev's.

You would not believe the amount of stuff they had packed into that house. Right inside the door they had a skinny table, and it was covered with little china people and animals surrounding an ancient metal lamp. My fingers wiggled as I passed, trying to tell me how easy it would be to pocket a peacock or a greyhound and suggesting that maybe I deserved a couple of free trinkets, given the situation, but I just kept going. I glanced into the kitchen as I hurried past, saw shelves lining the walls, and fancy glasses and china plates with paintings on them covered those shelves. There was a big picture of a mountain over the couch in the living room, and it looked like you could hardly walk in there for all the furniture and fancy chairs and tables covered with decorations, but I decided to just keep heading toward that voice because now that I was closer I could hear not what it was saying but the angry, bossy sound of it. I moved as fast as I could without making noise, a quick tiptoe. You should have seen the

dining room though, all shiny wood furniture and fancy dishes and wooden boxes that looked like they could have been full of silverware. Those boxes pulled like magnets drawing me into the room, and for a moment I stood frozen in place. "What about the attic?" the voice demanded, and I broke away from the dining room.

I sidled up to the half-open bedroom door and peeked in. Doo-dad and Bev knelt on the floor next to their bed, still in their pajamas. Bev was crying all bent over, but Doo-dad was straight as a tree, looking right up at Romano. "I bet you got a safe in here somewhere, too," Romano was saying, waving one of my nine-millimeters all over the room. Like I said before, I never used a gun to steal anything, but even I knew better than to look all around while you've got a gun on somebody, especially when that somebody is Doo-dad and he's about two feet from his nightstand drawer.

"Get out," I yelled, barging in, and Romano whirled, putting both hands on the gun and pointing it right at me. Doo-dad eased his hands around in front of himself.

"Stop moving," Romano shouted, putting the gun on Doo-dad again.

"Get the hell out!" I bellowed, and Romano gave me this wide-eyed, tilted-head look.

"But Mister--"

I waved my arm at him. "Go on, now!"

He finally took my advice, only because he didn't know what else to do. He walked out of the bedroom all cocky, stuffing the nine-millimeter into his waistband. Doo-dad eased the drawer open as quick as could be and pulled out his .38. "He's got a gun!" I called.

"I noticed that," Doo-dad growled, and jumped out into the hall, firing twice, but Romano was already running. All Doo-dad did was shoot two slugs into his own front door. He ran out

into the street pretty quick, then came hobbling back in like an old man, which is what he is. I went to have a seat in the dining room to give Bev a chance to pull herself together, only they had so much stuff packed in there I couldn't pull out a chair. Bev came out with a housecoat clutched around her and a Kleenex in each hand. "Come on," she said, and I followed her to the kitchen. Doo-dad joined us while she was gathering coffee mugs and fiddling with the coffeemaker. He set the gun on the table and sat down, shaking his head.

"I'd better go," I said.

"No, wait." Doo-dad stood up and opened the cabinet over the sink, taking out two fancy cut-glass tumblers. "I usually don't start until at least noon," he said. I watched him put ice between two dish cloths and bang at it with an old hammer. The whiskey came out of a glass-fronted cabinet in the dining room. He brought mine to me and sat down on the other side of the kitchen table. Bev leaned on the counter near her machine, waiting as it coughed and burbled.

"How does it feel to be one of the good guys?" Doo-dad asked, giving me a look.

I held my glass up in front of the window so a slice of early-morning sun shone through it and said, "I'd sure like to know."