

Sketch

Volume 57, Number 1

1992

Article 27

Safe Money

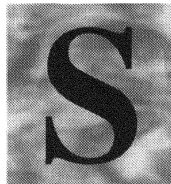
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Safe Money

Chris Schweda



Sollie Morrison is ill, flat on his back, struck down with the viral flu for three days running. His throat is blistered, his nose is stuffed, and his pecker stings when he pees. Karen is in the kitchen with Luella. Luella calls Sollie her do-nothing son-in-law. Sollie calls Luella his shit-for-brains mother-in-law. They haven't sat in the same room since the wedding reception six months ago.

Sollie and his brother Paulie had all their money riding on a sure-thing win-bet for Appolonia Paris in the third, but Paulie's on the horn now with the bad news. Rookie driver couldn't get to the rail, was boxed in, then faded at the three-quarter marker.

"Jesus," Sollie says.

"But Tony and me, we—" Paulie lowers his voice to a whisper. "All right. Listen, Sollie. Bivouac Considine in the fourth. Fifty fucking three to one. Huh?"

"We're busted, Paulie."

"Sollie. Listen to me. Three minutes ago, I see Fat Tony Scarfo on his way to the VIP lounge. Says he just heard from the stables. Outstanding fucking pacer, Sollie. Top-flight. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening."

Fat Tony says he'll run a one minute fifty-six. One fifty-six two, three. At most one fifty seven. At most, Sollie" In the background,

Sollie hears the track announcer. Three minutes left to bet on the fourth. "You got the racing card in front of you?"

"Yeah."

"You tell me, huh? You tell me even if you see a one-fifty seven in the fourth. Huh?"

Sollie looks down through the numbers.

Paulie says, "Huh?"

"Average."

"Listen to my brother, average he says. So all right. We get Fat Tony to spot us."

"Paulie—"

"Sollie. Fat Tony asked about you. I told him—"

"Fat Tony asked about me?"

"I told him Sollie's laid up with the flu. I told him Sollie and me we had a bad day with the third. Fat Tony asked me if there's anything Sollie needs. I told him Sollie needs a win is what. I told him we both need a win. Fat Tony said to me take Bivouac Considine. I said Fat Tony, at fifty three to one, come on, huh? But Fat Tony said as a favor to Sollie the inside line is Bivouac Considine."

"Fat Tony said that?"

"He said we should come down to see him next week when Sollie's feeling better."

"That's what Fat Tony said?"

"I just said he said it, didn't I?"

"Fifty what to one?"

"Three, Sollie."

Karen opens the bedroom door. Sollie sees that she's dressed in black for the funeral.

"God Sollie, it stinks in here." Karen opens the window. The Brooklyn air is cool. The curtains billow out into the afternoon breeze. "You seen my black pumps?"

She opens the door to the closet, kicks through the pile of Sollie's dirty clothes. "Huh?"

Sollie says. "I don't know, Paulie."

"You got a fever," Karen Says. She glares at Sollie. "Why you talking to Paulie?"

"Who's that?" Paulie asks.

"Karen," says Sollie, "shut the window! You want me to catch a worse cold?"

"You move my pumps again Sollie?" asks Karen. But before Sollie can say anything, she walks into the front room. But she forgets to close the bedroom door. "Close the door!" Sollie shouts. "Close the door!"

From out in the living room, Karen says, "Ma, you seen my good shoes?"

"What? Ask that do-nothing bum husband of yours," cries Luella.

Sollie leans forward and is about to yell at Karen again but sees Luella, the widow, sitting in the reading chair, her left hand wrapped in a white washcloth. Luella's wrists glow paper pale against the black lace on her dress sleeves. In her right hand, she's holding a string of rosary beads. She glares at Sollie. "He's on the phone again," says Luella. She raises her right arm, motions toward the bedroom. "Karen, look at

that. The bum!"

"He's sick I told you," Karen says. Karen looks beneath the chair.

"He's sick," Luella says. Her voice is loud, getting louder. Unsteadily, she makes her way to her feet then lumbers toward the bedroom door, pointing a thick finger at Sollie. "He's sick. He's sick up here. A sick bum. You hear me? A sick do-nothing bum!"

"Close the door! Close the door!" Sollie shouts. His sore throat burns.

"Sollie," Paulie says over the phone. "The fuck's going on?"

Luella is standing in the bedroom doorway, holding the washcloth to her hand. "Huh? You hear me, Mr. do-nothing? Yell like that at my daughter, huh?"

Karen pulls her shoes out from under the chair and then sees Luella. Karen stands up, grabs Luella's elbow. "Ma—"

"Leggo a' me. Karen, you listen—"

"Come on here in the kitchen."

"Stop pulling me! My own daughter, the day of my husband's funeral, she's manhandling the widow—"

"Ma." Karen's voice is calm. "In the kitchen."

"You'll flare the arthritis. Stop pulling!"

But Karen tugs her mother away from the doorway. Then with her black stockinged foot, Karen slams the bedroom door shut.



Paulie's impatient. "The fuck you have over there? Sollie—"

Sollie says, "No one. Luella. Paulie, Look. You still—" But in the background Sollie hears the announcer again. Two minutes.

"Sollie." Paulie's voice is urgent. "All right?"

"Paulie, what if—"

"What if what, Sollie? Huh? It's the inside fucking line here. Come on."

"I mean, what if, Paulie?"

"What if what, Sollie? What if next week we're sitting on the beach in Bermuda, huh? High rolling in Atlantic City? What if, Sollie? You play this pacer, I play him, Fat Tony gets his action. What nothing."

"Yeah."

"We do this right, Sollie. We follow up on the inside line—"

"Yeah—"

"You and Karen, me and Roxanne—"

"Yeah."

"We get a Vegas showgirl—"

"—uh, yeah, there you go."

"I mean, Sollie, with legs like those —"

"Yeah—"

"—and the titties out to here, it's—"

"Paulie—"

"—it's heaven, am I right?"

"You and me, all the way, Paulie."

"Yeah."

"Hey, I hear those Vegas chicks don't—"

"But Sollie. I gotta go up. I gotta go up and talk to Fat Tony now, huh?"

"—yeah, okay."

"All right?"

"How much we in for, Paulie?"

"Four, five g's, yeah, so what? Fat Tony's concerned, Sollie. He wants us to 'come down' next week. 'Does Sollie need anything?' Fucking five g's. Okay so what? Huh? Come

on, Sollie."

"Yeah?"

"You don't believe me? Sollie, I'm telling you—"

"I know that, Paulie."

"—as a 'favor for Sollie,' I swear it—"

"I know that—"

"—his eyes, Sollie—Fat Tony's eyes— listen to me—"

"All right, Paulie."

"—you know Fat Tony, huh?"

"Paulie, you deaf? All right I said."

"We're in?"

"How many times I gotta say it?"

"We're in for five then."

"But you call me, Paulie. You understand?"

"Sollie? Come on, you know I will—"

"Soon as you see the finish, Paulie. You fucking understand?"

"Yeah. All right. Look I gotta—"

"Paulie, wait. You got the dime for the phone call?"

"—uh, Fat Tony's upstairs, he's—shit—"

"Paulie—"

But the line clicks dead.

Sollie's sore throat is parched. He needs juice. His water glass is empty. He stands up, puts his ear to the door, listens. Silence. He turns the knob, pushes the door open a crack, and waits. Silence. He opens the door.

"Sick?" Luella is standing firm, planted in the middle of the living room. She's fingering her rosary beads, one by one. "The bum's not even sick! Look at him. Black socks, boxers shorts, dirty T-shirt. He's so sick he can't change his clothes?"

But Sollie dodges Luella and disappears into the kitchen.

"Karen, look at him, he looks like your

father. All day long, your father, he walked around in socks. Huh? Shuffled down the halls all day. Who wouldn't put him in a nursing home? How many pairs of socks you think I buy him?"

Karen takes the washcloth from her mother, then helps Luella on with her fur coat. "It's time to go, Ma."

"Eight pairs a month!" Luella cries. "That's how many. Me, don't I need clothes? I got shoes, sure. Old shoes. I get bunions. Corns." Luella groans as she sticks her arms into the coat sleeves. "He gives me this fur coat is all. Tells me it's Persian Lamb. But so what? I still got bad feet. Bad feet, bad fingers, bum for A son-in-law. What's a Persian Lamb going to do for my feet?"

Sollie come out of the kitchen with a carton of orange juice. He swigs a sip.

Luella snorts in disgust. "What? I—Karen, you see that? Just like your father. From the carton—he—"

But when Sollie sees Luella, he turns and walks back into the kitchen.

"Ma, we're late," Karen says.

"Maybe I should want a glass of juice!" Luella cries. "Keep it out of the Fridgidaire. I'll catch cold now, the flu." Luella looks at Karen. "Your father, I brought his favorite juice. I asked him: six years in the home, they don't give you juice glasses? Drank out of the carton. Disgusting."

"We gotta go, Ma," Karen says.

In the kitchen, Sollie gulps the rest of the juice. He puts the empty carton inside the Fridgidaire.

Sollie hears Luella say, "Let's try the ring again." He looks out into the living room and sees Luella pointing toward the coffee table where a silver ring is sitting on top of a white doily. "Maybe the ice and washcloth made the

swelling go down."

Karen hands her mother the ring. Then Luella tries to jam it down over a swelled knuckle joint. "I never wear this ring," Luella mumbles. "But so what? Your father before he stopped talking, he always said to me, why don't you wear the wedding ring? I told him, Maurice, I got bad joints. My fingers swell. Your father, he used to whine, he'd say a wife, she supposed to wear her husband's ring." Karen holds her mother's hand steady while Luella struggles to fit the ring over another joint. "So, all right, for Maurice's one and only funeral, I'll put up with the pain."

Suddenly Luella lets out a gasp.

"It's on!" Karen says.

"You broke the skin!" Luella cries. "Take it off!"

"It's fine, Ma."

Luella holds up her hand, "Fine? It's bleeding. I'll be infected." She tries to pull the ring off. "I feel it binding now."

Karen picks up the washcloth and dabs at her mother's knuckle. "You're fine."

"How you expect me to sit still when it's binding?"

"Hold the washcloth against your knuckle. We gotta go."

"Karen, the whole family—Uncle Carmine—everyone's gonna be there. You embarrass me with a washcloth? Washcloth in one hand, beads in the other." Luella looks down at the rosary beads. "Least I got nice beads."

"You're fine, Ma." Karen takes hold of her mother's elbow and guides her out the apartment into the dark hallway.

Sollie sits still for a moment and looks out into the dark, thin space between the kitchen window and the neighboring brownstone. He stares at the black fire escape which zig zags down to the cement alleyway below.

After a moment, he goes back into the bedroom. Out the window, he watches Karen and Luella walk past the Sabrett frankfurter stand parked down by the pawnshop at the corner. Luella walks slowly, holding onto Karen for support. Her other hand is wrapped in the white washcloth. The frankfurter vendor is yelling at two Latino kids who had been using a monkey wrench to turn on a fire hydrant. Water is shooting out of the hydrant, pooling in the street. The vendor points his sauerkraut spoon at the kids, then points down the street in the direction of the police station. But the kids laugh. The one with the monkey wrench holds the wrench close to his gut as if it were a low-slung machine gun. Then he points it toward the frankfurter man and jolts the wrench six, seven times, squeezing off a magazine full of imaginary rounds. The second kid flips the frankfurter man his middle finger. But Karen and Luella do not notice. They turn south at the pawnshop and disappear.

Sollie sits back down on the bed. The phone rings. Sollie yanks it from the cradle. "Paulie?"

"Sollie?" Paulie's voice is soft. "Bad news."

The next morning, Sollie's on the horn again with Paulie. Over the phone, in the background, Sollie listens to Paulie argue with Roxanne. And from his living room, Sollie hears Karen and Luella.

"I'll go to the grave beside Maurice," Luella is saying, "this ring now that's it's stuck for good on my finger."

"Keep your hand in the mineral oil," Karen says.

"Karen, it's binding worse. I feel it ballooning. Is it ballooning?"

"Sit still, Ma," Karen says.

"Sollie, you still there?" It's Paulie, back on the horn. "I gotta stay here in the kitchen. Watch the roast, my wife gripes. Keep an eye out."

"So finish what you was saying," says Sollie. "You and this new idea—"

"Yeah. Listen. All right. Fat Tony, he was apologetic."

"Apologetic?"

"He said he was sorry. He said he'd talk to that dumb son of a bitch driver. But we got a new problem. Fat Tony wants the vig today at five sharp."

"Today? What? Where we gonna get two, three hundred dollars?"

"Three hundred, yeah. Fat Tony gave us a break. We're all friends here."

"Three hundred a week for twenty weeks, Paulie. Is that what you're telling me?"

"But wait. Listen. Roxanne has cookie jar money. Emergency cash. We—"

"We say, Fat Tony, here's our cookie jar money. Huh?"

"No. We take Meadow Star in the first today."

Sollie is shocked. "Jesus, we just—"

"Yeah, I know it. But listen. Meadow Star at two to one, huh? And in the second, September Delaware at eight to five."

"We're five. . . five thousand in the hole, Paulie."

"Sollie. This is safe money. We do the Daily Double, huh? And then . . . then in the third, Dora Dora at five one. It's all safe money, Sollie. I swear."

"The fuck, Paulie? The fuck you swear on it? Safe money?"

"Two to one, that's how. Top form."



Slow starters, fast finishers. All three of them. I got the card here, Sollie. Right in front of me. I been over it five, six times.”

“You checked the numbers? You—”

“Yeah, yeah. Then we take the subway after the third, deliver the vig, no problem, huh?”

“What’s Roxanne got in the cookie jar?”

“How much you mean?”

“Yeah, fifty bucks, hundred, what?”

I’ll go look.”

From out in the living room, Sollie hears his wife: “All right, Ma. Now—no—now hold still, Ma. Don’t move.”

Luella’s whispering frantically. “Don’t pull it like that. It’s stinging, it’s—”

“Ma!”

“Karen, you can’t just—” And then Luella gasps.

“That’s it!” cries Karen. “Is that it?”

“That’s not it!” Luella cries. “Get me the Bactine!”

“What? Ma, don’t get up! Ma!”

“A bandage then! A Band-Aid! You cut the skin at the joint!”

“My fingers slipped. Sit down. Stay there.”

Paulie comes back on the phone.

“Sollie, you there?”

“Yeah.”

“I got it, Sollie.”

“How much?”

“The money in the jar?”

“How much money. . . the cash in the jar for christsake—”

“Right now—”

“In the jar—”

“Okay. Thirteen bucks, a couple. . . some nickels.”

“Paulie—”

“Sollie! Wait! I’m telling you. The jar,

it’s bone china. Huh? Solid gold leafing around the top—”

“The fuck can we do with thirteen bucks?”

“—Sollie. You’re not listening. Pawnshops get heirlooms like this cookie jar, huh? They fetch, maybe, fifty, seventy-five bucks. We’ll go to the pawnshop at your corner, say what we have is an heirloom bone china cookie jar. With solid gold leafing.”

Sollie is silent a long moment.

“What else do we do, huh?” Paulie says. “Our choices are limited. All I know there’s safe money in the first and second.”

“Paulie—”

“And now we’ve got this heirloom.”

“Real bone china, you sure?”

“With solid gold leafing, Sollie. Yeah.”

From the living room, Luella says, “I’m feeling chilled already. I got a virus now, an infection.”

“Put your fur on, Ma”

“Dr. Spanier told me to watch my joints. I knew this cold weather would balloon my joints.”

“Take the washcloth, Ma. You’ll be fine. Hold the washcloth against your knuckle.”

At Younkers, Paulie squints into the binoculars.

“The hell?”

“You see him? You see him?”

“Jesus—”

“Paulie—”

“He’s. . . he’s five, six, seven lengths out. . . he’s. . . the fuck? The fucking driver, he’s—”

“Sonofabitch—”



"The driver's not. . . he's stuck on the outside—"

But Sollie's heard enough. He sits down on the metal bleacher.

"The sonofabitch is fading in the stretch!" Paulie cries.

Sollie lowers his head. He listens to the rain pelt against the plate glass window.

"The sonofabitch! The son of a fucking bitch! Sollie you see that? Sollie, the driver, he's not pushing him. He's two to one is why! He's holding out for the big money for the next race! It's a money driver, Sollie. He's throwing the race!"

Sollie stares down at his shoes. They're scuffed. He wipes a streak of mud off the toe.

"Ride that sonofabitch!" Paulie screaming. "Ride that sonofabitch!"

Spent and busted, Sollie and Paulie jump the turnstiles, take the Rockaway Local, and are home by four thirty-three. Luella, on all fours and poking a pale arm beneath the reading chair, is first to look up. She's just retrieved her rosary beads. On her face, a snarl: "Back from the track, huh? Come back to visit the wife, console the widow?" Luella wraps the beads around her wrist, struggles to get to her feet, but a popping comes from her lower back. She grunts. "Karen," yells Luella, "Karen help me up!"

Karen comes out of the kitchen, holding a stick of Parkay. "Ma?"

"My beads slipped down. I can't," in a desperate whisper, "get to my...I'm—my back's cramping!"

Karen grabs hold of Luella, tugs her to her feet. Paulie bolts for the bathroom; Sollie,

the bedroom.

Luella's knees crack. She's on her feet now, breathing heavy, standing unsteady.

"Sollie—" Karen begins.

Luella collapses into the reading chair on top of her fur. Her explosive boil of black hair flattens against the upholstery. Miss Breck crackles and gives way. Luella squints, winces, then sighs. "Exhausted," she groans. "I got rug burns on my knees now." She begins fingering the beads.

Karen points the stick of margarine at Sollie. "Sollie, you stay put."

"What?"

"How come I get a call from Tony Scarfo? How come he calls up, asks me —"

From the bathroom, the toilet rorars, water's sucked down, pipes shake. Paulie walks into the living room, eyes downcast. He zips carefully.

Sollie grabs Paulie's arm. "Paulie, you hear that?"

"What?"

"Fat Tony's been calling." Sollie works his eyebrows up and down. "You hear that?"

Karen sits on the armrest. "Says he gonna stop by at five, any minute now. What's this all about, Paulie? Says he has some business with you two."

"Business?" Paulie shrugs. "Fat Tony's got no business with us. He's concerned is all."

"Because I've been sick." Sollie sniffs deep and coughs. "I'm still sick."

"Sollie's been ill," Paulie says. "That's all. Fat Tony's concerned. Wants us to stop down next week. Right, Sollie?"

"When I'm feeling better."

Luella sticks out her left hand, flutters her fingers piano-style, says: "Try the butter now. But watch the beads. Don't get the beads greasy."



Karen removes the beads from Luella's wrist, sets them on the white doily.

Sollie and Paulie head into the kitchen.

"Now, hold still, Ma." Karen smears butter on Luella's ring finger. Luella's skin is puffed red, swollen.

"You're yanking. Don't yank, Karen—

"Easy, Ma."

"You're yanking!"

"Ma!"

Suddenly Luella closes her eyes tight, breathes quickly, and jerks her head to one side.

"Karen!"

"It's off, Ma!"

"It's off?"

"I got it right here, Ma. It's right here. Come on into the bathroom, wash your hand."

"I'm stiff all over now," Luella groans. "Karen, help me up."

In the kitchen, Sollie and Paulie plot their options.

"Paulie, go where? The fuck you talking about? We can't go anywhere. We're broke—"

"Look, we borrow another, what, one, two grand? Do Atlantic City, Vegas. Someday we're bound to make it back. Everybody does." Paulie grins.

Sollie shakes his head. "No. Look, we play it straight with Fat Tony. He can appreciate that, he—"

"Straight? We tell him we don't got it? Tell him we tried real hard but couldn't make the vig? We gotta . . . at least, Sollie . . . we gotta make the first."

"But if we—"

"Yeah and if we miss it, he'll say, that's fine, Sollie. We're all friends here—"

"So. Okay, we'll ask for an extension. Another two, three more—"

"Sollie, all we do is get more for this

first vig. Just enough for this week."

"Where we gonna get the money?"

"Okay. I tell you, Sollie."

"Yeah. You tell me."

Sollie looks into the living room and sees Luella lumbering toward the bathroom. When Karen sets Luella's wedding ring down on the coffee table, Paulie looks at Sollie and smiles. Sollie says, "Not Luella's ring. No. Forget it."

"Forget it? Sollie, come on. The ring's worth—"

From the bathroom, Luella cries out, "Rubbing alcohol? Where's the Bactine? I said Bactine. You can't put on rubbing alcohol."

"It's all I got, Ma."

"Then leave it, just—"

"I can't leave it, I need to—here, Ma—wrap this Kleenex around—take this Kleenex, like that—"

"It's stinging. How come it's stinging? Where'd you put my beads?"

"The doily, Ma."

The doorbell rings. Sollie glances at the clock. Four fifty-five.

Paulie goes into the living room and swiftly pockets the ring.

"Paulie!" Sollie yells. His voice hoarse. "Put it back! Put it back!"

Paulie shakes his head no. Then picks up the beads, slips them in his pocket.

The doorbell rings again and then a voice: "Sollie? You in there? Open the door. It's Tony Scarfo."

"Sollie, get the door!" Karen yells from the bathroom.

Paulie looks around the living room. "You see anything else?" he asks. "Huh?"

"Put it back!" Sollie cries. He starts toward Paulie.

"Hey Paulie, is that you? Open up the door, Paulie!" cries Fat Tony.

Then Paulie sees Luella's fur. He grabs it. He throws it to Sollie.

"The fuck am I supposed to do with this?" Sollie throws it back to Paulie. Paulie snatches it, slings it over his shoulder, and breezes past Sollie, heading toward the kitchen.

Sollie cries out, "Paulie!" but Paulie's already out the window and onto the fire escape. Sollie walks into the kitchen, looks out the window, and sees Paulie jump from the fire escape into the alley.

Paulie looks up. "Sollie, Hurry up!"

From the bathroom, Karen cries out, "Sollie, you gonna open the door? You gonna let Tony in?"

And then Sollie crawls out the window. His shoes ping quickly against the metal fire escape stairs. He leaps down onto the gravel, and when he does, Paulie tosses him the fur. "Watch the fur, Sollie. Don't get it dirty." Paulie bolts for the street.

Sollie's about to toss the fur back, but Paulie's out of sight.

The street is deserted. Water is pooled out beside the fire hydrant. One of the Latino kids is standing beside Fat Tony's pearl-white Cadillac, reverently eyeing its silver spoked hubcaps. The other kid is touching the hood ornament. Sollie and Paulie start down the sidewalk toward the pawnshop. When they pass the frankfurter stand, the frankfurter man looks up suddenly and yells out, "Hey!"

Sollie looks over his shoulder in time to see the Latino kid with the monkey wrench prying off one of the spoked hubcaps. He pops the hubcap off the wheel. The hubcap clatters and spins onto the sidewalk.

Paulie pulls open the pawnshop's glass door. Merchant bells hung from the doorjamb clang. Three bare bulbs hang down from the high, wrought-iron ceiling. The store smells of

old clothes, ancient things. Paulie sets Luella's ring and rosary beads on the glass counter. The pawnbroker is sitting on a wood rocker. His hair is gray. He wears small, pince-nez glasses. The pawnbroker considers the both of them for a long moment. "Back again, you boys? More heirlooms?"

Paulie is breathing hard, panting. "We need cash again."

The pawnbroker smiles at Paulie.

"How much for these?" Paulie asks.

The pawnbroker makes his way to his feet, studies both items, and says, "Ring's worth one hundred. The beads—" he picks the beads up, considers their weight, then sets them back down. "—the beads, fifty because of the gold crucifix."

Paulie is nodding. "We'll take it. That's fine. We'll take it. And we got a fur. Sollie, give him the fur."

The pawnbroker's hands are worn. His fingernails have yellowed and curved inward. He watches Sollie.

"Sollie," Paulie says again. "Give it to him." Paulie grabs the sleeve of the fur. But Sollie holds tight. "Sollie," Paulie says, "we only got one-fifty. We only got half the money."

But Sollie shakes his head no. "Not the fur. We'll tell Fat Tony—"

"No?" Paulie's eyes flare. "No?"

"—tell him that we got half, he'll under—"

"Jesus fucking Christ." Paulie yanks at the fur. Sollie yanks back. "Sonofabitch," Paulie says. "Sonofabitch!" And then Paulie hits Sollie on the side of his head with an open palm.

Shocked, Sollie double-steps backward.

Paulie snatches the fur and puts it on the counter. "How much?"

"Paulie—" Sollie begins. His voice is hoarse, almost a whisper.



"Shutup!" Paulie yells over his shoulder. "How much for the fucking fur?"

"Fine fur," says the pawnbroker. His fingers run up and down the fur. "Like velvet. It's imported. Persian lamb, no?"

Paulie leans in close. "Sure it is. How much? How much?"

"Two hundred."

Paulie says yes, he'll take it. The pawnbroker counts the cash out in twenty dollar bills. Sollie touches his fingers to the side of his head. Then he looks at his fingertips. "My ear is bleeding," he whispers. "Paulie, I fell my ear bleeding."

Paulie slips the money in his pocket, takes Sollie by the elbow, and pulls him outside.

Outside, the air is warm. Paulie holds onto Sollie's elbow, walking quickly down the street.

"We're set now," Paulie says. "Okay Sollie. Your ear's fine. Can you hear me?"

"Yeah," Sollie says.

Fat Tony's Cadillac is still parked in front of Sollie's brownstone. The Latino

kids have disappeared. Paulie runs up the concrete steps and holds the door open for Sollie. "Let's go. Fat Tony's waiting. Are you all right? Come on."

Sollie stands at the bottom of the steps. "I need some juice. There's no more juice in the apartment."

"Yeah, well. Come on, Sollie." Paulie goes down the steps, grabs Sollie's elbow, and leads him into the building's lobby. "Listen, we give Fat Tony his money, get your ear cleaned up, take ourselves out for a good time. I'll get you some juice. That sound good?"

"Maybe."

"We're set now, Sollie. You hear me?" Paulie puts his arm around Sollie. He reaches in his back pocket, removes a handkerchief, and presses it against his brother's ear. "We did real good."

"Yeah," Sollie says.

"Nothing more to worry about now, Sollie. We're set."

"Okay," says Sollie. "We're set now, Paulie."

